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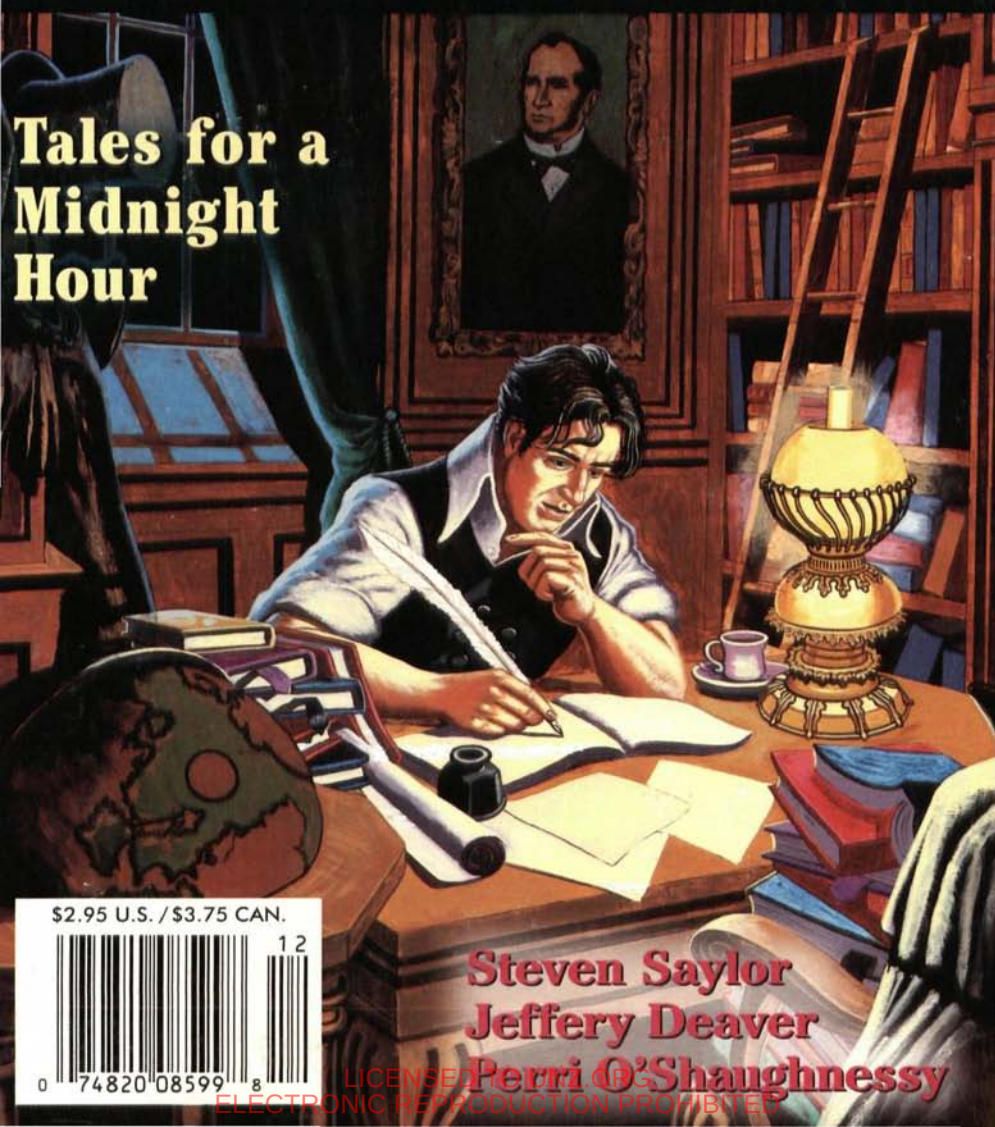

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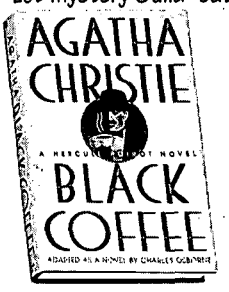

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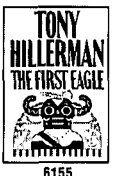

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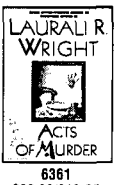

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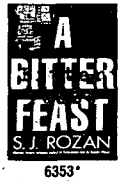

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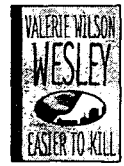

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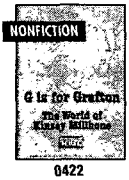

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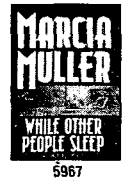

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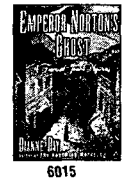

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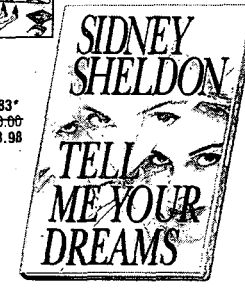

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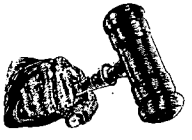

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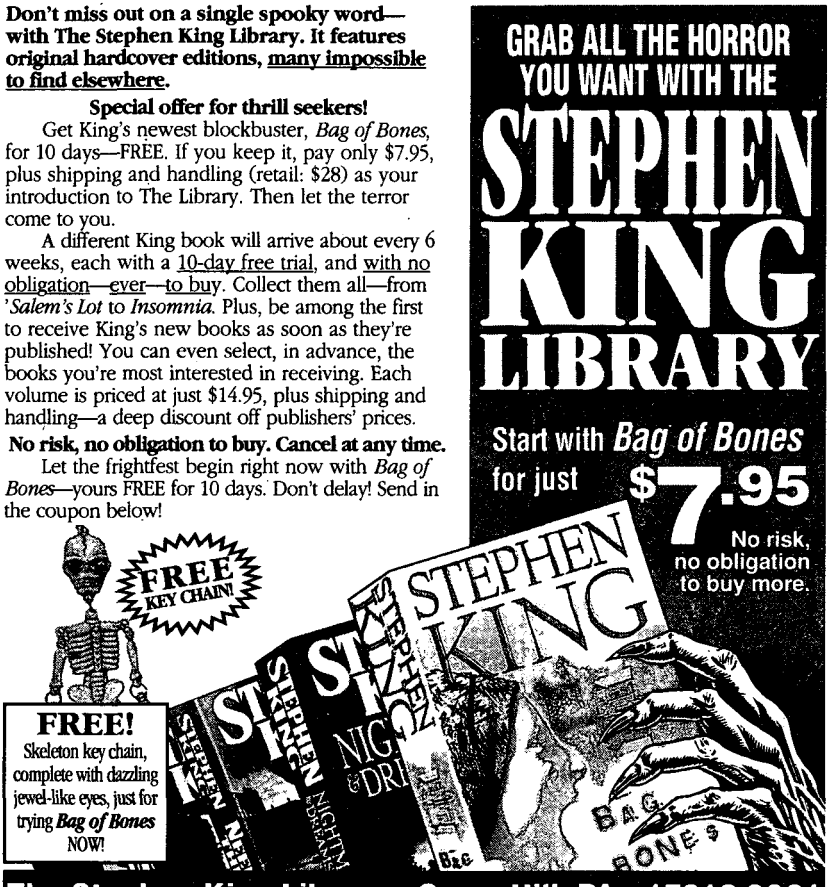
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POPPY AND THE POISONED CAKE

by Steven Saylor

"Young Cicero tells me that you can be discreet. Is that true, Gordianus? Can you keep a confidence?"

Considering that the question was being put to me by the magistrate in charge of maintaining Roman morals, I weighed my answer carefully. "If Rome's finest orator says a thing, who am I to contradict him?"

The censor snorted. "Your friend Cicero said you were clever, too. Answer a question with a question, will you? I suppose you picked that up from listening to him defend thieves and murderers in the law courts."

Cicero was my occasional employer, but I had never counted him as a friend, exactly. Would it be indiscreet to say as much to the censor? I kept my mouth shut and nodded vaguely.

Lucius Gellius Poplicola—Poppy to his friends, as I would later find out—looked to be a robust seventy or so. In an age wracked by civil war, political assassinations, and slave rebellions, to reach such a rare

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and venerable age was proof of Fortune's favor. But Fortune must have stopped smiling on Poplicola—else why summon Gordianus the Finder?

The room in which we sat, in Poplicola's house on the Palatine Hill, was sparsely appointed, but the few furnishings were of the highest quality. The rug was Greek, with a simple geometric design in blue and yellow. The antique chairs and the matching tripod table were of ebony with silver hinges. The heavy drapery drawn over the doorway for privacy was of some plush green fabric shot through with golden threads. The walls were stained a somber red. The iron lamp in the middle of the room stood on three griffin's feet and breathed steady flames from three gaping griffin mouths. By its light, while waiting for Poplicola, I had perused the little yellow tags that dangled from the scrolls which filled the pigeonhole bookcase in the corner. The censor's library consisted entirely of serious works by philosophers and historians, without a lurid poet or frivolous playwright among them. Everything about the room bespoke a man of impeccable taste and high standards—just the sort of fellow whom public opinion would deem worthy of wearing the purple toga, a man qualified to keep the sacred rolls of citizenship and pass judgment on the moral conduct of senators.

EQMM is immensely proud to have published Steven Saylor's first work of fiction in 1992. In the intervening six years, he has gained an enviable reputation—compared to Robert Graves for historical authenticity and Agatha Christie for his plots. New books are available in the author's series on Ancient Rome. Look for *The House of the Vestals, Rubicon,* and *Last Seen in Massilia.*

"It was Cicero who recommended me, then?" In the ten years since I had met him, Cicero had sent quite a bit of business my way.

Poplicola nodded. "I told him I needed an agent to investigate . . . a private matter. A man from outside my own household, and yet someone I could rely upon to be thorough, truthful, and absolutely discreet. He seemed to think that you would do."

"I'm honored that Cicero would recommend me to a man of your exalted position and—"

"Discretion!" he insisted, cutting me off. "That matters most of all. Everything you discover while in my employ—*everything*—must be held in the strictest confidence. You will reveal your discoveries to me and to no one else."

From beneath his wrinkled brow he peered at me with an intensity that was unsettling. I nodded and said slowly, "So long as such discretion does not conflict with more sacred obligations to the gods, then yes, Censor, I promise you my absolute discretion."

"Upon your honor as a Roman? Upon the shades of your ancestors?"

I sighed. Why must these nobles always take themselves and their problems so seriously? Why must every transaction require the invoca-

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tion of dead relatives? Poplicola's earth-shattering dilemma was probably nothing more than an errant wife or a bit of blackmail over a pretty slaveboy. I chafed at his demand for an oath and considered refusing; but the fact was that my daughter Diana had just been born, the household coffers were perilously depleted, and I needed work. I gave him my word, upon my honor and my ancestors.

He produced something from the folds of his purple toga and placed it on the little table between us. I saw it was a small silver bowl, and in the bowl there appeared to be a delicacy of some sort. I caught a whiff of almonds.

"What do you make of that?" he said.

"It appears to be a sweet cake," I ventured. I picked up the little bowl and sniffed. Almonds, yes; and something else . . .

"By Hercules, don't eat any of it!" He snatched the bowl from me. "I have reason to believe it's been poisoned." Poplicola shuddered. He suddenly looked much older.

"Poisoned?"

"The slave who brought me the cake this afternoon, here in my study—one of my oldest slaves, more than a servant, a companion really—well, the fellow always had a sweet tooth . . . like his master, that way. If he shaved off a bit of my delicacies every now and then, thinking I wouldn't notice, where was the harm in that? It was a bit of a game between us. I used to tease him; I'd say, 'The only thing that keeps me from growing fat is the fact that you serve my food!' Poor Chrestus . . ." His face became ashen.

"I see. This Chrestus brought you the cake. And then?"

"I dismissed Chrestus and put the bowl aside while I finished reading a document. I came to the end, rolled up the scroll, and put it aside. I was just about to take a bite of the cake when another slave, my doorkeeper, ran into the room, terribly alarmed. He said that Chrestus was having a seizure. I went to him as quickly as I could. He was lying on the floor, convulsing. 'The cake!' he said. 'The cake!' And then he was dead. As quickly as that! The look on his face—horrible!" Poplicola gazed at the little cake and curled his lip, as if an adder were coiled in the silver bowl. "My favorite," he said in a hollow voice. "Cinnamon and almonds, sweetened with honey and wine, with just a hint of aniseed. An old man's pleasure, one of the few I have left. Now I shall never be able to eat it again!"

And neither shall Chrestus, I thought. "Where did the cake come from?"

"There's a little alley just north of the Forum, with bakery shops on either side."

"I know the street."

"The place on the corner makes these cakes every other day. I have a standing order—a little treat I give myself. Chrestus goes down to fetch one for me, and I have it in the early afternoon."

"And was it Chrestus who fetched the cake for you today?"

For a long moment he stared silently at the cake. "No."

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"Who, then?"

He hunched his thin shoulders up and pursed his lips. "My son, Lucius. He came by this afternoon. So the doorkeeper tells me; I didn't see him myself. Lucius told the doorkeeper not to disturb me, that he couldn't stay; he'd only stopped by to drop off a sweet cake for me. Lucius knows of my habit of indulging in this particular sweet, you see, and some business in the Forum took him by the street of the bakers, and as my house was on his way to another errand, he brought me a cake. The doorkeeper fetched Chrestus, Lucius gave Chrestus the sweet cake wrapped up in a bit of parchment, and then Lucius left. A little later, Chrestus brought the cake to me. . . ."

Now I understood why Poplicola had demanded an oath upon my ancestors. The matter was delicate indeed. "Do you suspect your son of tampering with the cake?"

Poplicola shook his head. "I don't know what to think."

"Is there any reason to suspect that he might wish to do you harm?"

"Of course not!" The denial was a little too vehement, a little too quick.

"What is it you want from me, Censor?"

"To find the truth of the matter! They call you Finder, don't they? Find out if the cake is poisoned. Find out who poisoned it. Find out how it came about that my son . . ."

"I understand, Censor. Tell me, who in your household knows of what happened today?"

"Only the doorkeeper."

"No one else?"

"No one. The rest of the household has been told that Chrestus collapsed from a heart attack. I've told no one else of Lucius's visit, or about the cake."

I nodded. "To begin, I shall need to see the dead man, and to question your doorkeeper."

"Of course. And the cake? Shall I feed a bit to some stray cat, to make sure . . ."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Censor." I picked up the little bowl and sniffed at the cake again. Most definitely, blended with the wholesome scent of baked almonds was the sharper odor of the substance called bitter-almond, one of the strongest of all poisons. Only a few drops would suffice to kill a man in minutes. How fiendishly clever, to sprinkle it onto a sweet almond-flavored confection, from which a hungry man with a sweet tooth might take a bite without noticing the bitter taste until too late.

Poplicola took me to see the body. Chrestus looked to have been fit for his age. His hands were soft; his master had not overworked him. His waxy flesh had a pinkish flush, further evidence that the poison had been bitter-almond.

Poplicola summoned the doorkeeper, whom I questioned in his master's presence. He proved to be a tight-lipped fellow (as doorkeepers should be), and added nothing to what Poplicola had already told me.

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Visibly shaken, Poplicola withdrew, with instructions to the doorkeeper to see me out. I was in the foyer, about to leave, when a woman crossed the atrium. She wore an elegant blue stola and her hair was fashionably arranged with combs and pins into a towering configuration that defied logic. Her hair was jet black, except for a narrow streak of white above her left temple that spiraled upward like a ribbon into the convoluted vortex. She glanced at me as she passed but registered no reaction. No doubt the censor received many visitors.

"Is that the censor's daughter?" I asked the doorkeeper.

"No."

I raised an eyebrow, but the tight-lipped slave did not elaborate. "His wife, then?"

"Yes. My mistress Palla."

"A striking woman." In the wake of her passing, a kind of aura seemed to linger in the empty atrium. Hers was a haughty beauty that gave little indication of her age. I suspected she must be older than she looked, but she could hardly have been past forty.

"Is Palla the mother of the censor's son, Lucius?"

"No."

"His stepmother, then?"

"Yes."

"I see." I nodded and took my leave.

I wanted to know more about Poplicola and his household, so that night I paid a visit to my patrician friend Lucius Claudius, who knows everything worth knowing about anyone who counts in the higher circles of Roman society. I intended to be discreet, honoring my oath to the censor, and so, after dinner, relaxing on our couches and sharing more wine, in a roundabout way I got onto the topic of elections and voting, and thence to the subject of census rolls. "I understand the recent census shows something like eight hundred thousand Roman citizens," I noted.

"Indeed!" Lucius Claudius popped his pudgy fingers into his mouth one by one, savoring the grease from the roasted quail. With his other hand he brushed a ringlet of frizzled red hair from his forehead. "If this keeps up, one of these days citizens shall outnumber slaves! The censors really should do something about restricting citizenship."

My friend's politics tend to be conservative; the Claudii are patricians, after all. I nodded thoughtfully. "Who are the censors nowadays, anyway?"

"Lentulus Clodianus . . ." he said, popping a final finger into his mouth, ". . . and old Lucius Gellius Poplicola."

"Poplicola," I murmured innocently. "Now why does that name sound familiar?"

"Really, Gordianus, where is your head? Poplicola was consul two years ago. Surely you recall that bit of unpleasantness with Spartacus? It was Poplicola's job as consul to take the field against the rebel slaves, who gave him a sound whipping—not once, but twice! The disgrace of it, farm slaves led by a rogue gladiator, thrashing trained legionnaires

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led by a Roman consul! People said it was because Poppy was just too old to lead an army. He's lucky it wasn't the end of his career! But here it is two years later, and Poppy's a censor. It's a big job. But safe—no military commands! Just right for a fellow like Poppy—been around forever, honest as a stick."

"Just what do the censors do?"

"Census and censure, their two main duties. Keep the roll of voters, assign the voters to tribes, make sure the patrician tribes carry the most weight in the elections—that's the way of it. Well, we can hardly allow those seven hundred and ninety-nine thousand common citizens out there to have as much say in electing magistrates as the thousand of us whose families have been running this place since the days of Romulus and Remus; wouldn't make sense. That's the census part."

I nodded. "And censure?"

"The censors don't just say who's a citizen and who's not; they also say what a citizen should be. The privilege of citizenship implies certain moral standards, even in these dissolute days. If the censors put a black mark for immoral conduct by a man's name in the rolls, it's serious business. They can expel a fellow from the Senate. In fact . . ." He leaned forward and lowered his voice to emphasize the gravity of what he was about to say. "In fact, word has it that the censors are about to publish a list of *over sixty men* they're throwing out of the Senate for breach of moral character—taking bribes, falsifying documents, embezzling. Sixty! A veritable purge! You can imagine the mood in the Senate House. Everyone suspicious of everyone else, all of us wondering who's on the list."

"So Poplicola is not exactly the most popular man in the Forum these days?"

"To put it mildly. Don't misunderstand, there's plenty of support for the purge. I support it myself, wholeheartedly. The Senate needs a thorough housecleaning! But Poppy's about to make some serious enemies. Which is ironic, because he's always been such a peacemaker." Lucius laughed. "Back when he was governor of Greece in his younger days, they say Poppy called together all the bickering philosophers in Athens and practically pleaded with them to come to some sort of consensus about the nature of the universe. 'If we cannot have harmony in the heavens, how can we hope for anything but discord here on Earth?'" His mimicry of the censor's reedy voice was uncanny.

"Census and censure," I murmured, sipping my wine. "I don't suppose ordinary citizens have all that much to fear from the censors."

"Oh, a black mark from the censor is trouble for any man. Ties up voting rights, cancels state contracts, revokes licenses to keep a shop in the city. That could ruin a man, drive him into poverty. And if a censor really wants to make trouble for a fellow, he can call him before a special Senate committee to investigate charges of immorality. Once that sort of investigation starts, it never ends—just the idea is enough to give even an honest man a heart attack! Oh yes, the censorship is a powerful office. That's why it has to be filled with men of absolutely

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irreproachable character, completely untainted by scandal—like Poppy." Lucius Claudius suddenly frowned and wrinkled his fleshy brow. "Of course, there's that terrible rumor I heard only this afternoon—so outrageous I dismissed it out of hand. Put it out of my mind so completely that I actually forgot about it until just now . . ."

"Rumor?"

"Probably nothing—a vicious bit of slander put about by one of Poppy's enemies . . ."

"Slander?"

"Oh, some nonsense about Poppy's son, Lucius, trying to poison the old man—using a sweet cake, if you can believe it!" I raised my eyebrows and tried to look surprised. "But these kinds of stories always get started, don't they, when a fellow as old as Poppy marries a woman young enough to be his daughter, and beautiful as well. Palla is her name. She and her stepson Lucius get along well—what of it? People see them out together now and again without Poppy, at a chariot race or a play, laughing and having a good time, and the next thing you know, these nasty rumors get started. Lucius, trying to poison his father so he can marry his stepmother—now that would be a scandal! And I'm sure there are those who'd like to think it's true, who'd love nothing better than to see Poppy pulled down into the muck right along with them."

The attempted poisoning had taken place that afternoon—and yet Lucius Claudius had already heard about it. How could the rumor have spread so swiftly? Who could have started it? Not Poplicola's son, surely, if he were the poisoner. But what if Poplicola's son were innocent of any wrongdoing? What if he had been somehow duped into passing the deadly cake by his father's enemies, who had then gone spreading the tale prematurely . . .

Or might the speed of the rumor have a simpler explanation? It could be that Poplicola's doorkeeper was not nearly as tight-lipped as his terse answers had led me to think. If the doorkeeper told another slave in the household about the poison cake, who then told a slave in a neighbor's house, who then told his master . . .

I tried to keep my face a blank, but Lucius Claudius saw the wheels spinning in my head. He narrowed his eyes. "Gordianus—what are you up to? How did we get onto the subject of Poplicola, anyway? Do you know something about this rumor?"

I was trying to think of some way to honor my oath to the censor without lying to my friend, when I was saved by the arrival of Lucius Claudius's beloved Momo. The tiny Melitaean terrier scampered into the room, as white as a snowball and almost as round; lately she had grown as plump as her master. She scampered and yapped at Lucius's feet, too earthbound to leap onto the couch. Lucius summoned a slave, who lifted the dog up and placed it on his lap. "My darling, my sweet, my adorable little Momo!" he cooed, and in an instant seemed to forget all about Poplicola, to my relief.

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Bitter-almond is a difficult poison to obtain. I am told that it is extracted from the pits of common fruits, but the stuff is so lethal—a man can die simply from having it touch his skin, or inhaling its fumes—that most of the shady dealers in such goods refuse to handle it. The rare customer looking for bitter-almond is usually steered into purchasing something else for his purpose, "Just as good," the dealer will say, though few poisons are as quick and certain as bitter-almond.

My peculiar line of work has acquainted me with all sorts of people, from the highest of the high, like Poplicola, to the lowest of the low—like a certain unsavory dealer in poisons and potions named Quintus Fugax. Fugax claimed to be immune to every poison known to man, and even boasted that on occasion he tested new ones on himself, just to see if they would make him sick. To be sure, no poison had yet killed him, but his fingers were stained permanently black, there was a constant twitch at the corner of his mouth, his skin was covered with strange splotches, his head was covered with scabs and bald spots, and one of his eyes was covered with a rheumy yellow film. If anyone in Rome was unafraid to deal in bitter-almond, it was Quintus Fugax.

I found him the next day at his usual haunt, a squalid little tavern on the riverfront. I told him I wanted to ask some general questions about certain poisons and how they acted, for my own edification. So long as I kept his wine cup full, he agreed to talk with me.

Several cups later, when I judged that his tongue was sufficiently loosened by the wine, I asked him if he knew anything about bitter-almond. He laughed. "It's the best! I always tell people so, and not just because I'm about the only dealer who handles it. But hardly anybody wants it. Bitter-almond carries a curse, some say. People are afraid it'll turn on them, and they'll end up the dead one. Could happen; stuff can practically kill you just by you looking at it."

"Not much call for bitter-almond, then?"

"Not much." He smiled. "But I did sell a bit of it, just yesterday."

I swirled my wine and pretended to study the dregs. "Really? Some fishmonger wanting to do in his wife, I suppose."

He grinned, showing more gaps than teeth. "You know I never talk about my customers."

I frowned. "Still, it can't have been anyone very important. I'd have heard if some senator or wealthy merchant died from sudden convulsions after eating a hearty meal."

Fugax barked out a laugh. "Ha! Try a piece of cake!"

I caught my breath and kept my eyes on the swirling dregs. "I beg your pardon?"

"Customer wanted to know if you could use bitter-almond in an almond sweet cake. I said, 'Just the thing!' "

"What was he, a cook? Or a cook's slave, I suppose. Your customers usually send a go-between, don't they? They never deal with you face-to-face."

"This one did."

"Really?"

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"Said she couldn't trust any of her slaves to make such a sensitive purchase."

"She?"

He raised his eyebrows and covered his mouth, like a little boy caught tattling, then threw back his head and cackled. "Gave that much away, didn't I? But I can't say who she was, because I don't know. Not poor, though. Came and went in a covered litter, all blue like her stola. Made her bearers stop a couple of streets away so they couldn't see where she went and I wouldn't see where she came from, but I sneaked after her when she left. Watched her climb into that fancy litter—hair so tall she had to stoop to get in!"

I summoned up a laugh and nodded. "These crazy new hairstyles!"

His ravaged face suddenly took on a wistful look. "Hers was pretty, though. All shiny and black—with a white streak running through it, like a stripe on a cat! Pretty woman. But pity the poor man who's crossed her!"

I nodded. "Pity him indeed . . ."

The enviable corner spot on the street of the bakers was occupied by a family named Baebius; so declared a handsomely painted sign above the serving counter that fronted the street. A short young blonde, a bit on the far side of pleasingly plump but with a sunshiny smile, stepped up to serve me. "What'll you have today, citizen? Sweet or savory?"

"Sweet, I think. A friend tells me you make the most delicious little almond cakes."

"Oh, you're thinking of Papa's special. We're famous for it. Been selling it from this shop for three generations. But I'm afraid we don't have any today. We only make those every other day. However, I can sell you a wonderful cheese and honey torte—very rich."

I pretended to hem and haw and finally nodded. "Yes, give me one of those. No, make it three—hungry mouths at home! But it's too bad you don't have the almond cakes. My friend raves about them. He was by here just yesterday, I think. A fellow named Lucius Gellius."

"Oh yes, we know him. But it's not he who craves the almond cakes, it's his father, the censor. Old Poplicola buys one from every batch Papa bakes!"

"But his son Lucius *was* here yesterday?"

She nodded. "So he was. I sold him the sweet cake myself and wrapped it up in parchment for him to take to his father. For himself and the lady he bought a couple of little savory custards. Would you care to try—"

"The lady?"

"The lady who was waiting for him in the blue litter."

"Is she a regular customer, *too*?"

The girl shrugged. "I didn't actually see her; only got a glimpse as Lucius was handing her the custard, and then they were off toward the Forum. There, taste that and tell me it's not fit for the gods."

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I bit into the cheese and honey torte and feigned an enthusiastic nod. At that moment, it could have been ambrosia and I would have taken no pleasure in it.

I made my report to Poplicola that afternoon. He was surprised that I could have concluded my investigation so swiftly, and insisted on knowing each step in my progress and every person I had talked to. He stood, turned his back to me, and stared at the somber red wall as I explained how I came to suspect the use of bitter-almond; how I questioned one of the few men who dealt in that particular poison, plied him with wine, and obtained a description that was almost certainly of Palla; how the girl at the bakery shop not only confirmed that Lucius had purchased the cake the previous day, but saw him leave in a blue litter with a female companion.

"None of this amounts to absolute proof, I admit. But it seems reasonably evident that Palla purchased the bitter-almond in the morning, that Lucius was either with her at that time, and stayed in the litter, or else joined her later, and then the two of them went to the bakery shop, where Lucius purchased the cake. Then one or both of them together sprinkled the poison onto the cake—"

Poplicola hunched his gaunt shoulders and produced a stifled cry, a sound of such despair that I was stunned into silence. When he turned to face me, he appeared to have aged ten years in an instant.

"All this is circumstantial evidence," he said, "not legal proof."

I spoke slowly and carefully. "Legal proof is narrowly defined. To satisfy a court of law, all the slaves involved would be called upon to testify—the litter bearers, your doorkeeper, perhaps the personal attendants of Palla and Lucius. Slaves see everything, and they usually know more than their masters think. They would be tortured, of course; the testimony of slaves is inadmissible unless obtained by torture. Acquiring that degree of proof is beyond my means, Censor."

He shook his head. "Never mind. We both know the truth. I knew it all along, of course. Lucius and Palla, behind my back—but I never thought it would come to this!"

"What will you do, Censor?" It was within Poplicola's legal rights, as *paterfamilias,* to put his son to death without a trial or any other formality. He could strangle Lucius with his own hands or have a slave do it for him, and no one would question his right to do so, especially in the circumstances. He could do the same thing to his wife.

Poplicola made no answer. He had turned to face the wall again, and stood so stiff and motionless that I feared for him. "Censor . . . ?"

"What will I do?" he snapped. "Don't be impertinent, Finder! I hired you to find out a thing. You did so, and that's the end of your concern. You'll leave here with some gold in your purse, never fear."

"Censor, I meant no—"

"You swore an oath, on your ancestors, to speak of this affair to no one but me. I shall hold you to it. If you're any sort of Roman—"

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"There's no need to remind me, Censor," I said sharply. "I don't make oaths lightly."

He reached into a pouch within his purple toga, counted out some coins, laid them on the little table before me, and left the room without saying another word.

I was left to show myself out. On my way to the foyer, addled by anger, I took a wrong turn and didn't realize it until I found myself in a large garden surrounded by a peristyle. I cursed and turned to retrace my steps, then glimpsed the couple who stood beneath the colonnade at the far corner of the garden, their heads together as if engaged in some grave conversation. The woman was Palla. Her arms were crossed and her head was held high. The man, from his manner toward her, I would have taken to be her husband had I not known better. Lucius Gellius looked very much like a younger replica of his father, even to the chilly stare he gave me as I hastily withdrew.

In the days that followed, I kept my ears perked for any news of developments at the house of Poplicola, but there was only silence. Was the old man plotting some horrible revenge on his son and wife? Were they still plotting against him? Or had the three of them somehow come together, with confessions of guilt and forgiveness all around? I hardly saw how such a reconciliation could be possible after such a total breach of trust.

Then one morning I received a note from my friend Lucius Claudius:

> Dear Friend, Dinner Companion, and Fellow Connoisseur of Gossip,
>
> We never quite finished our discussion about Poplicola the other day, did we? The latest gossip (horrible stuff): On the very eve of the great purge in the Senate, one hears that certain members are planning to mount a prosecution against the censor's son, Lucius Gellius, accusing him of *sleeping with his stepmother* and *plotting to kill Poppy*. Such a trial will stir up a huge scandal—what will people think of a magistrate in charge of morals who can't stop his own son and wife from fornicating and scheming to do him in? Opponents (and likely targets) of the purge will say, "Clean up your own house, Poplicola, before you presume to clean ours!"
>
> Who knows how such a trial might turn out? The whole family will be dragged through the mud—if there's any dirt on any of them, the prosecutors will dig it up. And if Lucius is found guilty (I still can't believe it), they won't allow him exile—he'll be put to death along with Palla, and to save face Poplicola will have to play stern *paterfamilias* and watch while it's done! That would be the death of Poppy, I fear. Certainly, it would be the end of his political career. He'd be utterly humiliated, his moral authority a joke. He couldn't possibly continue as censor. No purge of the Senate, then, and politics can go on as usual! What an age we live in.
>
> Ah well, come dine with me tonight. I shall be having fresh pheasant, and Cook promises to do something divine with the sauce. . . .

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The pheasant that night was succulent. The sauce had an intriguing insinuation of mint that lingered teasingly on the tongue. But the food was not what I had come for.

Eventually we got around to the subject of the censor and his woes.

"There's to be a trial, then," I said.

"Actually . . . no," said Lucius Claudius.

"But your note this morning—"

"Invalidated by fresh gossip this afternoon."

"And?"

Lucius leaned back on his couch, stroked Momo, and looked at me shrewdly. "I don't suppose, Gordianus, that you know more about this affair than you're letting on?"

I looked him in the eye. "Nothing that I could discuss, even with you, my friend, without violating an oath."

He nodded. "I thought it must be something like that. Even so, I don't suppose you could let me know, simply yes or no, whether Lucius Gellius and Palla really—Gordianus, you look as if the pheasant suddenly turned on you! Well, let no one say that I ever gave a dinner guest indigestion from pressing an improper question. I shall simply have to live not knowing. Though in that case, why I should tell *you* the latest news from the Forum, I'm sure I don't know."

He pouted and fussed over Momo. I sipped my wine. Lucius began to fidget. Eventually his urge to share the latest gossip got the better of him. I tried not to smile.

"Very well, since you must know: Poppy, acting in his capacity as censor, has convoked a special Senate committee to investigate his own son on a charge of gross immorality—namely this rumor about adultery and attempted parricide. The committee will take up the investigation at once, and Poppy himself will preside over it."

"But how will this affect the upcoming trial?"

"There won't be a trial. The investigation supersedes it. It's rather clever of Poppy, I suppose, and rather brave. This way he heads off his enemies, who would have made a public trial into a spectacle. Instead, he'll see to the question of his son's guilt or innocence himself, behind closed doors. The Senate committee will make the final vote, but Poppy will oversee the proceedings. Of course, the whole thing could spin out of his control. If the investigating committee finds Lucius Gellius guilty, the scandal will still be the ruin of Poppy." He shook his head. "Surely that won't happen. For Poppy to take charge of the matter himself, that must mean that his son is innocent, and Poppy knows it—doesn't it?" Lucius raised an eyebrow and peered at me expectantly.

"I'm not sure what it means," I said, and meant it.

The investigation into the moral conduct of Lucius Gellius lasted two days, and took place behind the closed doors of the Senate House, where none but scribes and witnesses and the senators themselves were allowed. Fortunately for me, Lucius Claudius was among the sen-

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ators on the investigating committee, and when the investigation was done he invited me once again to dine with him.

He greeted me at the door himself, and even before he spoke I could tell from his round, beaming face that he was pleased with the outcome.

"The committee reached a conclusion?" I said.

"Yes, and what a relief!"

"Lucius Gellius was cleared of the charges?" I tried not to sound skeptical.

"Completely! The whole business was an absurd fabrication! Nothing to it but vicious rumors and unfounded suspicions."

I thought of the dead slave, Chrestus. "There was no evidence at all of Lucius Gellius's guilt?"

"No such evidence was presented. Oh, so-and-so once saw Palla and Lucius Gellius sitting with their legs pressed together at the Circus Maximus, and another so-and-so saw them holding hands in a marketplace one day, and someone else claims to have seen them kiss beneath some trees on the Palatine Hill. Nothing but hearsay and rubbish. Palla and Lucius Gellius were called upon to defend themselves, and they both swore they had done nothing improper. Poplicola himself vouched for them."

"No slaves were called to testify?"

"This was an investigation, Gordianus, not a trial. We had no authority to extract testimony under torture."

"And were there no other witnesses? No depositions? Nothing regarding the poisoned cake that was rumored?"

"No. If there *had* been anyone capable of producing truly damning evidence, they'd have been found, surely; there were plenty of senators on the committee hostile to Poppy, and believe me, since the rumors first began, they've been scouring the city looking for evidence. It simply wasn't there."

I thought of the poison dealer, and of the blond girl who had waited on me at the bakery shop. I had tracked them down with little enough trouble; Poplicola's enemies would have started out with less to go on, but surely they had dispatched their own finders to search out the truth. Why had the girl not been called to testify, at least? Had no one made even the simple connection between the rumor of the poisoned cake and the bakery shop which produced Poplicola's favorite treat? Could the forces against the censor have been so inept?

Lucius laughed. "And to think of the meals I left untouched, fretting over Poppy! Well, now that he and his household have been vindicated, he can get on with his work as censor. Tomorrow Poppy will post his list of senators who've earned a black mark for immoral conduct. Good riddance, I say. More elbow room for the rest of us in the Senate chambers!" He sighed and shook his head. "Really, all that grief, and the whole thing was a farce."

Yes, I thought warily, so it had ended up—a farce. But what role had I played in it?

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The next day I went to the street of the bakers, thinking to finally taste for myself one of the famous almond sweet cakes baked by the Baebius family—and also to find out if, indeed, no one from the Senate committee had called upon the blond girl.

I strolled up the narrow, winding little street and arrived at the corner with a shock. Instead of the blond girl's smiling face behind the serving counter, I saw a boarded-up storefront. The sign bearing the family name, there for three generations, had been obliterated with crude daubs of paint.

A shopkeeper down the street saw me gaping and called to me from behind his counter.

"Looking for the Baebii?"

"Yes."

"Gone."

"Where?"

"No idea."

"When?"

He shrugged. "A while back. Just up and left overnight, the whole lot of them. Baebius, his wife and daughter, the slaves—here one day, all gone the next. Poof! Like actors falling through a trapdoor on a stage."

"But why?"

He gestured that I should step closer, and lowered his voice. "I suspect that Baebius must have gotten himself into serious trouble with the authorities."

"What authorities?"

"The Senate itself!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a day or two after he vanished, some pretty rough-looking strangers came snooping up and down the block, asking for Baebius and wanting to know where he'd gone. They even offered money, but nobody could tell them. And then, a few days after that, here come more strangers asking questions, only these were better dressed and carried fancy-looking scrolls; claimed they were conducting some sort of official investigation, and had 'senatorial authority.' Not that it mattered; people around here still didn't know what had become of Baebius. It's a mystery, isn't it?"

"Yes . . ."

"I figure Baebius must have done something pretty bad, to get out of town that sudden and not leave a trace behind." He shook his head. "Sad, though; his family had been in that shop a long time. And you'd think he might have given me his recipe for those almond cakes before he disappeared! People come by here day and night asking for those cakes. Say, could I interest you in something sweet? These honey-glazed buns are fresh out of the oven. Just smell that aroma. . . ."

Is it better to visit a poison dealer on a full stomach or an empty one?

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Empty, I decided, and so I declined the baker's bun and made my way across the Forum and the cattle market to the riverfront, and thence to the seedy little tavern frequented by Quintus Fugax.

The interior seemed pitch-dark after the bright sunshine. I had to squint as I stumbled from bench to bench, searching among the derelicts. Only the most hardened drinkers were in such a place at that time of day. The place stank of spilled wine and river rot.

"Looking for someone?" asked the tavern keeper.

"A fellow called Fugax."

"The scarecrow with the rheumy eye and the bad breath?"

"That's him."

"You're out of luck, then, but not as out of luck as your friend."

"What do you mean?"

"They dragged him out of the river a couple of days ago."

"What?"

"Drowned. Poor sod must have fallen in; not my fault if a man leaves here too drunk to walk straight. Or maybe . . ." He gave me a significant look. "Maybe somebody pushed him in."

"Why do you say that?"

"Fugax had been strutting around here lately, claiming he was about to come into a big sum of money. Crazy fool! Saying a thing like that in this neighborhood is asking for trouble."

"Where was he going to get this money?"

"That's what I wondered. I asked him, 'What, are you planning to sell your garden villa on the Tiber?' He laughed and said he had something to sell, all right—information, important information that powerful people would pay a lot for; pay to get it, or pay to keep others from getting it. Not likely, I thought! 'What could a river rat like you know that anybody would give a fig to find out?' He just laughed. The fellow was half crazy, you know. But I figure maybe somebody heard him bragging, tried to rob him, got angry when they didn't find much, and threw him in the river. The dock workers that found him say it looked like he might have hit his head on something—hard to tell with all those scabs and rashes. Did you know him well?"

I sighed. "Well enough not to mourn too much over his death."

The tavern keeper looked at me oddly. "You need something to drink, citizen."

I had declined the baker's bun, but I accepted the tavern keeper's wine.

The doorkeeper at Poplicola's house tersely informed me that his master was not receiving visitors. I pushed past him and told him I would wait in the red study. I waited for quite a while, long enough to peruse a few of the scrolls in Poplicola's little library: Aristotle on ethics, Plato on the examined life. There was a movement at the green curtain drawn over the doorway. It was not Poplicola who entered, but Palla.

She was shorter than I had thought; her elaborate turret of hair gave an illusion of height. But she was actually more beautiful than I had

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realized. By the reflected light of the red walls her skin took on a smooth, creamy luster. The bland youthfulness of her face was at odds with the worldliness in her eyes. Seeing her so close, it was harder than ever to calculate her age.

"You must be Gordianus," she said.

"Yes."

"My husband is physically and emotionally exhausted by the events of the last few days. He can't possibly see you."

"I think he should."

"Has he not paid you yet?"

I gritted my teeth. "I'm not an instrument to be used and then disposed of. I helped him discover the truth. I brought him certain information. Now I find that an innocent family has been driven into hiding, and another man is dead, very likely murdered to keep him quiet."

"If you're talking about that wretch Fugax, surely the whole city is better off being rid of such a creature."

"What do you know about his death?"

She made no answer.

"I insist that your husband see me," I said.

She looked at me steadily. "Anything you might wish to say to Poppy, you may say to me. We have no secrets from each other—not anymore. Everything has come out into the open between us."

"And your stepson?"

"Father and son are reconciled."

"The three of you have worked it all out?"

"Yes. But that's really none of your business, Finder. As you say, you were hired to find out a thing, and you did. There's an end of it."

"An end of Chrestus, and of Fugax, you mean. And who knows what's become of the baker and his family."

She drew a deep breath and gave me a bemused look. "The slave Chrestus belonged to my husband. His death was an injury to my husband's property. Chrestus was old and slow, he pilfered from his master's food and might not have survived another winter; his market value was nil. It's for Poppy and Poppy alone to seek recompense for the loss, and if he chooses to overlook it, then neither you nor anybody else has any business poking further into the matter."

She crossed her arms and paced slowly across the room. "As for Fugax, as I say, his death is no loss to anyone. A public service, I should think! When the trial began to loom, and then the investigation, he tried to blackmail us. He was a stupid, vile, treacherous little man, and now he's dead. That, too, is none of your business."

She reached the far corner and turned around. "As for the baker and his family, they were paid a more than adequate compensation for their trouble."

"The man's family had been in that shop for generations! I can't believe he left of his own free will."

She stiffened her jaw. "True, Baebius was not completely cooperative, at

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first. A certain amount of pressure was required to make him see reason."

"Pressure?"

"A black mark from a censor could have made a great deal of trouble for Baebius. Once that was explained to him, Baebius saw that it would be best if he and his family left Rome altogether and set up shop elsewhere. I'm sure his almond cakes will be just as popular in Spain as they were here in Rome. Poppy shall miss them, alas." She spoke without a shred of irony.

"And what about me?"

"You, Gordianus?"

"I knew more than anyone."

"Yes, that's true. To be candid, I thought we should do something about you; so did my stepson. But Poppy said that you had sworn an oath of secrecy upon your ancestors, that you gave him your word, Roman to Roman. That sort of thing counts for a great deal with Poppy. He insisted that we leave you alone. And he was right; you kept silent. He expects you to remain silent. I'm sure you won't let him down."

She flashed a serene smile, without the least hint of remorse. It struck me that Palla resembled a bit of poisoned cake herself. "So you see," she said, "it's all worked out for the best, for everyone concerned."

Legally and politically, the affair of Poplicola and the poisoned cake was at an end. The court of public opinion, however, would continue to try and retry the case for years to come.

There were those who insisted that the Senate investigation had been rigged by Poplicola himself; that vital witnesses had been intimidated, driven off, even killed; that the censor was morally bankrupt, unfit for his office, and that his happy household was a sham.

Others defended Poplicola, saying that all the talk against him originated with a few morally depraved, bitter ex-senators. There were even those who argued that the episode was proof of Poplicola's wisdom and profound sense of judgment. Upon hearing such shocking charges against his son and wife, many a man would have rushed to avenge himself on them, taking their punishment into his own hands; but Poplicola had exercised almost superhuman restraint, called for an official inquiry, and ultimately saw his loved ones vindicated. For his patience and cool-headed perseverance, Poplicola was held up as a model of Roman sagacity, and his loyal wife Palla was admired as a woman who held her head high even when enduring the cruelest slanders.

As for his son, Lucius Gellius's political career advanced more or less unimpeded by the scandal. He became more active than ever in the courts and in the Senate House, and openly expressed his ambition to someday be censor, following in his father's footsteps. Only rarely did his unproved crimes come back to haunt him, as on the occasion when he sparred with Cicero in a rancorous debate and threatened to give the great orator a piece of his mind—to which Cicero replied, "Better that, Lucius Gellius, than a piece of your cake!" ●

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THE COUSIN NOOSE

by Percy Spurlark Parker

This month sees the return of four Department of First Stories authors: Percy Spurlark Parker, Steven Saylor, Batya Yasgur, and Perri O'Shaughnessy. Mr. Parker's debut occurred in the April, 1972 issue. Except for a single subsequent contribution by the author to an *EQMM* anthology (*Prime Crimes*), there was a hiatus in his submissions to us until the mid '90s. He joins us now with a case for series character Bull Benson. ✝

Big Bull Benson remembered reading in some book or magazine that it was a pity you couldn't pick your own relatives. He had no major gripe with his brother, who was making a career out of the Army, or his sister, who was trying to raise the biggest family on the West Side. It was his cousin Reggie who'd always irked him. Reggie was always in and out of jail for one petty criminal act after another. The few times he'd gotten a straight job, he managed to screw it up.

Bull was a gambler and he didn't try to hide the fact; he was kind of proud of it. He'd won the deed to his bar and hotel in a poker game some years ago. The Benson Hotel, with the Bull Pen Bar and Grill taking up most of the first floor, made him a man of property and gave him an ounce or two of respectability. But the cops always looked at him with a very close eye, eager for the chance to haul him in. They would love the opportunity to use Reggie as a noose, to wrap him around the neck of one Big Bull Benson and hang him from the courthouse flagpole. He didn't need Reggie in his life and had very little to do with him.

But a cop had been killed, Reggie had been identified, and the trio of detectives in his office weren't listening to any excuses.

"Maybe you need a trip downtown where we can talk in private, Benson."

Detective Lieutenant Gregco, Homicide Central, the white cop in the middle of the trio, was doing most of the talking and threatening. Bull had run into him a couple of times before. The first time was enough to learn they didn't, and would never, like each other.

"Here, downtown, it don't make no difference to me, Lieutenant. It won't change what I've already said; I haven't seen or heard from Reggie in over a month. If I knew where he was I'd give him up in a

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minute. I don't go for folks getting killed, even cops."

"I tol'ya he was a smart ass, Lieutenant," Charlie Evans said, his dark cheeks puffed in a snarl. He was standing to Gregco's left. "We ought to take him in anyway."

"He's cooperating like I said he would," Vern Wonler cut in; he was the tallest of the three, his long face befitting his lanky frame. "Jamming him up is not getting us closer to Reggie."

Years back, Charlie and Vern had been partners, working out of the local Moore Street Precinct. There had always been a conflict where Bull was concerned. Charlie drew very definite lines as to what constituted being a law-abiding citizen, and Bull didn't come anywhere close to meeting the criteria. With Vern it was different. He and Bull had grown up together, two black kids running the streets. And though Bull knew there was never a question of friendship interfering with Vern's police work, he felt Vern knew him better than any other cop on the force and knew there were certain things he just wouldn't do.

"You call it cooperating, I call it the same ol' Bull Benson." Charlie was a sergeant working out of Homicide Central now. He had always been beefy, but his shoulders seemed to have gotten a little thicker over the years, and his close-cropped hair had begun to thin in the middle.

Gregco looked back and forth at the two black detectives on either side of him, then directed a frown to Bull, his heavy eyebrows crowding his pale gray eyes. "If you're pulling my chain on this, Benson, you and any 'friends' you have on the force are going down. Do I have to be any clearer?" He glanced over to Vern, then back to Bull. "Do I?"

"I hear you, Lieutenant," Bull said. "Just hope you've heard me. Reggie's blood, but if he did this I ain't going to try covering for him."

"What d'ya mean, if?" Charlie barked.

Bull smoothed out the corners of his moustache. "How reliable a witness can a wino like Dink be?"

That got the attention of all three, but the fact that he knew who their witness was should not have surprised them. He'd known what the whole deal was when they came into his office. A little over three hours ago, two dudes had walked into Mel's Blues Bar on the West Side. Masked and waving automatics, they'd forced the manager to open the safe, taking the weekend receipts. There was an off-duty cop in the joint, in plain clothes, and he followed them out of the bar, drawing his own gun. The two unmasked themselves once outside, heading for a car waiting at the curb. The cop stepped out behind them and instead of blasting away he announced himself, ordering them to stop. That's when the last dude turned and fired, striking the cop twice in the chest. Dink Harris, one of the local winos, was in the adjacent alley relieving himself and said he'd seen the whole thing. He hadn't got a good look at the driver or the other stickup man, but he knew Reggie and fingered him right away.

People told Bull things, for favors owed and for favors due. He could pick up a phone and find out what the mayor had for breakfast, or who

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was running the next high-stakes poker game. He'd had the whole story an hour after it happened from a couple of different sources. It was all part of being who and what he was, and he told them this, adding, "If I get wind of where he is, I'll let you know. If that's not good enough for you, then do what you have to do."

"I say we take him in." It was Charlie, being Charlie.

Vern shook his head. "If he's going to be of any help to us, it won't be from behind bars."

Gregco took a deep breath, worked on his frown again. "Charlie, get on the horn to headquarters. Make sure we got this Harris guy wrapped up. If Benson knows who our witness is, I'm sure his cousin does also."

Gregco turned back to him after Charlie left. "Your cousin's not going to get away with this, Benson. That's a promise."

There wasn't much more to be said after that. Bull didn't try, neither did Vern or Gregco.

He fired up a cigar after they left, pulled the bottle of Grand-Dad out of his bottom desk drawer. He guessed if he ever made it through the week without a major hassle somewhere along the line, he'd have to check his own ID. A peaceful life just wasn't in the cards for him. He made several phone calls, downing a couple of good jolts of Grand-Dad and smoking up most of his cigar. The calls went out for information, to folks who knew the street, heard the whispers. Delbert, Joe Queenie, Sweet Hocks Ann, they all got the word that Bull wanted to get hold of Reggie as bad as the cops did. There was one difference: Bull was offering cash.

All he had to do now was sit and wait; the calls would be coming in. Once he found out where Reggie was hiding, he'd turn the info over to the police and that would be that, or maybe he'd even bring him in himself. There would be a certain advantage in doing it that way, not to mention the satisfaction of seeing the expressions on Gregco's and Charlie's faces.

There were two doors in his office, one leading out into the bar and grill, and a side door that opened onto the small hall that gave access to the kitchen and the hotel's back entrances. It was the side door that opened just then, and Reggie slid into the office.

"Hey, Coz, what's happening?" If he ate regularly, he probably would have some meat on his bones; as it was, besides a thick mane of hair, bones were most of what he looked like.

He tried a big wide grin as he sauntered over to the desk in the hitching-step manner that the dudes on the corner think makes them look cool. Bull was never really sure where the walk came from; it had certainly been around for a long time. It wasn't inherent, although a number of folks would say it was their natural way. He tended to look at it more as roosters strutting their stuff, or maybe just plain tight shoes.

"You've really done it this time," Bull said as Reggie dropped into one of the two chairs that sat in front of the desk.

"It's a frame-up, Coz. I ain't done nuttin'," Reggie responded with a hunch of his shoulders, his clothes hanging loosely on him.

"You popped a cop, Reggie. You call that nothing?"

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"Dink's lying."

Reggie's knowing who the eyewitness was didn't mean a whole lot, he could've gotten the name the same way Bull had. Then on the other hand, he could have seen Dink in the alley as he came out of the bar.

"Why the hell would Dink want to implicate you?"

"I owe him some money. He's been after me to pay up. Tol' 'im to shove it where the sun don't shine; guess this is payback."

"You really don't lie very well."

"I ain't lying, Bull, I've owed him a couple of hundred 'bout six months now."

"Where does a wine-head like Dink get two hundred dollars to loan you?"

"He gets a check every month from the V.A., and it wasn't a loan, it was a bet. I said Michael Jordan came into the league in eighty-five, he said eighty-four. Hell, I had the *Sports Illustrated* in my back pocket. I'd just read the damn article that afternoon, thought I had a sure thing. But I was pretty juiced up and I got the year wrong. He's been after me to pay up ever since."

"Who the hell is supposed to believe that story? Fingering you for a murder over a two-hundred-dollar debt is kind of extreme."

"Extreme? What's extreme for Dink? The ol' fart ain't been right since he came back from Viet Nam. Some say he wasn't right when he went in. You ever been drinking with him? He relives the war when he gets enough of that stuff in him. It can be frightening."

It had all seemed so easy at first, get ahold of Reggie and turn him over to the cops. Nice and clean. Make the cops happy and get rid of the thorn in his side all at the same time. But now, in spite of his better judgment, he felt Reggie could be telling the truth.

Call the cops. He still knew that was the smart thing to do, what he was supposed to do, and he was pissed at himself because he knew he wasn't going to. He guessed when it came right down to it, Reggie was family, and the cops were the cops.

"What d'you want from me, Reggie?"

He shrugged. "Hell, I don't know, man. Help. Advice. Ain't nothing like this ever been laid on me before. If the cops get me they gonna beat me till I tell them I did it, if they don't shoot me down in the street first. Hell, you know that. I didn't do it, Bull, and I didn't know who else to go to."

"Where were you when this thing went down?"

"When did it happen?"

"About six."

He shrugged again and this time his jacket seemed to raise and lower independent of his bony shoulders. "I was in my room, alone. I left about six-thirty, quarter to seven. I don't think anybody saw me. I've been ducking the landlord lately."

Bull didn't expect much more; an alibi would've been too much to ask for. So, he had to work with what he had, which wasn't a hell of a lot.

"You need to turn yourself in."

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"That's your advice, Coz? Thanks, I could've done that instead of coming over here."

"You need to turn yourself in. It's the smart thing to do, but you don't do it until I get hold of my lawyer. He's out of town until tomorrow. You got some place other than your apartment to go to?"

"There's an abandoned building on Brownwell. Seven-hundred block. Third floor, middle apartment. I've hung out there a time or two. Get in through the back door. Looks locked, but it just takes a good push."

"Okay, get on over there. Look for us first thing in the morning. We'll work it out."

Reggie stood. "Bull, I—damn, thanks, man." He stuck his hand out.

Bull kept his hands on his side of the desk. "Yeah, sure. You just better not be lying to me."

Reggie slid out the side door just as he had slid in, but a lot had changed in the small time he'd been in the office. Bull had put himself between Reggie and the cops. Not the smartest or safest thing to do. He had only himself to blame, though; he'd called the game, cut the cards, now he had to go with it.

The cops weren't going to let Dink out of their sight, which meant there was no way Bull was going to get to Dink and find out if he was just mistaken, or lying. He had to work it another way. If the whole deal was planned, that would make Dink an accomplice to the holdup, and his part was to misdirect the cops. Even Bull didn't like the odds on that being the case.

Bull fired up a cigar from the humidor on his desk, letting the rich smell and smoke of the tobacco envelop him. It had to have happened by chance. Dink was just there when the two men ran out of the bar, and the shooter, who may or may not have looked like Reggie, had blown the cop away. When he was questioned, Dink saw it as the perfect way to get even with Reggie and sicced the cops on him. It could have gone that way, he thought, trying to convince himself.

Whichever way it had gone down, he'd done all he could from his office. If he couldn't talk to Dink, there was still Mel at Mel's Blues Bar.

The bar was on the West Side, on Jackson, in the middle of the block on the west side of the street, two blocks beyond the expressway. It was easy to get to. Bull had visited the joint before. There was always one trio or another occupying Mel's small corner stage. He'd caught B.B. King here once, sitting in late one night after doing a show downtown. It was a cozy place and it had made him think about trying live music at the Bull Pen sometime.

The bar was locked, and the police yellow barrier tape still closed off the sidewalk in front of the place. Dark, dried splotches of blood showed where the cop had fallen, a dozen or so flies keeping vigil on the area. He should've phoned first before driving out; he knew there would only be a slim chance Mel would be here. Sitting around waiting for things to happen had always been difficult for Bull. Driving out to the bar made him feel like he was doing something, or at least trying to.

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The police probably had Mel at the station checking mug shots. He could be there for hours. If he knew where Mel lived he could camp out there, but he didn't, so it wasn't a real issue anyway. He went over to the alley where Dink said he'd been standing. It smelled bad enough for the whole neighborhood to have been using it as a toilet, and the location would've given Dink an unrestricted view of the front of the bar.

Bull took his time lighting a cigar, letting the richness of the tobacco combat the odor of the alley. There was a series of three- and four-story buildings across the street from the bar, some with storefronts on their first floors. The cops had more than likely canvassed the area pretty heavily, especially since one of their own had gotten killed, but he'd been able to pick up bits and pieces they'd missed in the past. Hell, he was here, it was worth a try.

One of the storefronts belonged to a small restaurant. He crossed the street behind a lumbering old panel truck that sounded as if it had a bad carburetor.

"Coffee, black," he said, sliding onto one of the stools at the counter.

The waitress took a few steps back to the coffee pot, filled a cup, and brought it to him. Her black roots were overtaking her reddish-brown dye job, and the whole array was piled high and held secure with a half-dozen or so long hairpins. "Want some pie or something with that, mister?"

Smoking and drinking was something he never had to think about to do. But smoking, drinking, and eating was a feat he'd never mastered. "Sure, what kind you got?" he asked, putting out the cigar in an ashtray on the counter.

"Apple."

"Fine." He waited until she returned with the pie. "Had a little excitement across the street tonight?"

"You a cop?"

"Do I look like a cop?"

"You're big enough, ugly enough. Yeah, you look like a cop."

He laughed. "Well, I'm not, just an interested party. You see what went down?"

"Naw, not really. Heard the shots, car door slamming. When I looked up all I saw was some guy laying on the sidewalk in front of Mel's and old Dink coming out of the alley."

"Dink?"

"One of our neighborhood drunks. We've got plenty of them, believe me. Been around longer than most. I slip him a sandwich every once in a while. Usually he's okay, but he can get real crazy at times."

"He see what happened?"

"I don't know. Cops took him with them, though."

Their conversation didn't last much longer, time enough for him to finish his coffee and pie, learn her name was Natalie, and that she was off most Mondays and Tuesdays.

He made two other stops before returning to his place. Jodi's Star Bowl had hosted a P.B.A. tournament a few years back. Jodi knew

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every floorboard in her thirty-two-alley establishment, but she didn't know any more about the shooting than Bull did. It was the same with Pete, the paper man. He had more of a shop than a stand, selling everything from chewing gum to hand-held video games. He was located across from the largest bus depot on the West Side, but even with all the traffic no one was volunteering any info.

Once back at the Bull Pen, the evening was pretty routine. He hauled out a stack of bills, paying the ones that were due, and even did a turn behind the bar. He was behind the bar and had just finished serving a refill of draught to one of the regulars when the call came in.

"If ya really want to help your cousin, Benson, I'd forget about this lawyer business."

"Who is this?"

"Just a dude with some advice for ya. Ain't no lawyer gonna get Reggie off. He did it and that's that. Only help he needs is ta get his ass out of town fast."

"What am I supposed to do now, run out and buy him a bus ticket?"

"Hell, I don't care how you do it, man, as long as it's done."

"You have to do better than that. How come you're so sure he did it?"

"Hey, I was there, I was driving."

"And you saw Reggie off the cop?"

"How much clearer do I have to be? Yeah, I saw him. Nobody expected it to happen, but it did. If that cop hadn't been playing hero everything would've been all right."

"Maybe he was just doing his job?"

"What?"

"Never mind." The caller had already rationalized himself out of any blame. He was just an innocent bystander caught up in a cop killing because he happened to be driving the getaway car.

"You just get him the hell out of town. It'll be better for everybody, okay?"

The caller hung up then, leaving Bull to contemplate his next move, which really wasn't much of a choice now. He had to turn Reggie over to the cops.

Driving the getaway car, in the eyes of the law, made the caller just as guilty of killing the cop as the dude who pulled the trigger. Under police questioning, Reggie wouldn't hold any names back. So the caller was also looking out for himself in wanting Bull to get Reggie out of town. And in calling to aid Reggie, the caller had wiped out the last bit of flimsy belief Bull held of Reggie's innocence.

Reggie had been the only person Bull had spoken to about getting him a lawyer. He hadn't even gotten around to leaving a message on his lawyer's answering machine. For the caller to know about the lawyer meant Reggie had told him. And who else would Reggie discuss the matter with except the dudes who pulled the job with him. He wondered if they'd all had a good laugh about Big Bull Benson coming to his cousin's rescue.

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There were actually three abandoned buildings in the seven-hundred block of Brownwell, and four vacant lots interspersing the few buildings that were occupied. Bull walked the block once, trying to get a feel on which building Reggie might be in, then decided on the last one he came to just because he needed a place to start. It was the right choice. Like Reggie had said, the back door appeared locked, but a good push got it opened. He'd brought along a flashlight, which helped him find the back stairwell and prevented him from stepping into a ragged hole that served as the fifth step.

He started calling to Reggie when he reached the second-floor landing. There was no reason not to announce his arrival. For all Reggie knew, Bull could've been bringing him a ham sandwich. But the last time Bull checked, hard bologna and stale bread was the main menu at the city lockup.

Bull continued to call out as he reached the third floor, but the only response he got was a dim light showing beneath one of the doors down the hall. Maybe Reggie was asleep. Bull called out again as he knocked on the door. Maybe Reggie had drunk himself into a stupor. The door swung open from the force of Bull's knocking. Maybe Reggie was dead.

He lay in the middle of the room, facedown, trails of blood forming in the cracks of the floorboards. A shadeless table lamp hung upside down from the ceiling, suspended by a crooked nail and attached to an extension cord that ran along the ceiling to the cardboard-covered window. There was a sofa against one wall, a chair, and a small table lying on its side next to Reggie. Bull knelt to check for a pulse. The body was still warm, the stench of cordite heavy in the little room, but if there was a heartbeat, it was too weak for Bull to detect.

He started to reach for his flip-phone, when he heard the door closing behind him.

"All right, big man, let's do this nice and easy."

Damn, he should've been more aware of his surroundings, but he hadn't expected to find Reggie sprawled on the floor. He stood, turned slowly. There were two of them, both about the same height, wearing slacks and jackets. The big difference was that one was holding a .38 automatic with all the cool confidence the weapon gives, and the other looked like he had to run to the washroom.

"As big as you are, you've got to be Reggie's cousin," the dude with the gun said. He had a fuller face than his partner, dark, colder eyes.

Bull nodded. "And you?"

A smirk curled the right corner of his mouth. "Let's just say we're former business associates."

"I suppose you did this?" He knew the answer, but right now Bull figured the best thing to do was to keep him talking. In most hostage situations, there's a time when the hostage can strike back. The difficult part was in recognizing the time when it presented itself.

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He shrugged. "Reggie was too hot. Cops were going to catch up with him pretty soon."

"And if they had him, they had you?"

A nod this time, exposing a few specks of gray in the moderately cropped hair. "It's the way it looked to me."

"And I guess you're the one who called me."

The one without a noticeable gun jumped, his narrow forehead shiny with perspiration.

"You called him?"

"I—I was only trying to get him to get Reggie out of town, Mace," Sweat Face said; the fear in his voice hung on every word. It was obvious he knew Mace wasn't planning on leaving any witnesses.

"That's what you're doing here, big man? Got a plane ticket on you, or a big wad of cash?"

"Out in my car."

"Yeah, what?"

"Ticket to L.A., few C notes. But you won't find them. I don't keep stuff like that in the glove compartment." Bull didn't know if he was buying the story. The flow of conversation had led him into the lie and he decided to keep it going. Every distraction lessened the steadiness with which the gun was held on him.

"You telling me the truth, big man?" Mace asked, cocking his head slightly.

"I don't lie with a gun pointing at me."

"Maybe that's the reason you *are* lying," Mace said, motioning with the gun as he stepped forward. He was the man, he was in control, everything was going his way.

The separation was all Sweat Face needed. He bolted for the door, bumping into the door jamb as he ran. Mace was too good for him, though; he swung, crouching slightly, and fired twice. Sweat Face cried out as he stumbled into the darkness of the hallway.

Seconds, that's all it had taken, no time for plans, just reaction. As Mace swung back to Bull, the side of his jaw met Bull's fist. It wasn't Bull's best left hook; he'd thrown better dozens of times. But it was decent enough. He felt jawbone crack under the force of the blow as the gun went off again. His thigh stung sharply as he delivered an uppercut that separated the gun from Mace's hand, and Mace from the conscious world.

He'd used his cellular to call the cops. Mace's reflex shot had caught him high on the fleshy part of his thigh, in and out. A nice clean wound, the doctor said. He'd be okay but he'd have a little limp for a few weeks. "Sweat Face," George Brookhaven, had been hit twice, but he'd pulled through the operation, and had been eager to talk to the cops. As he'd told Bull over the phone, he'd just been the driver. "Mace," Melvin Macio Brown, had come up with the idea for the robbery. No one was supposed to get hurt, but the cop had run out behind them and Reggie had shot him.

Brookhaven had walked in on Mace just as he gunned down Reggie,

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and felt he was set to be next if Bull hadn't come along. Mace was being hard-nosed and talking only through his court-appointed lawyer. Seems that his self-preservation tactics were spurred on by the fact that he was wanted in St. Louis on a double-homicide charge. Bull learned all this from Vern after Lieutenant Gregco ranted, raved, and threatened him for a good half-hour. There was really no wrong they could prove he'd done, so Gregco had settled for ranting, raving, and threatening.

Bull had taken care of Reggie's funeral arrangements, nothing fancy. He couldn't glorify a murderer, yet he was family. And surprisingly—although he knew he'd never liked Reggie, cringed when he came around, never spoke well of him—as they lowered the casket into the ground he felt a loss. ●

ZOO CAPER

by Katherine H. Brooks

On their way to the zoo she had scolded him loudly,
When Frank made a purchase and asked her to wait.
"I've bought us a lottery card," he said proudly,
"I'll scratch if off after we enter the gate."

As they stared at the animals Natalie grumbled.
She said he was stupid and selfish and rash,
While Frank from a pocket his fantasy fumbled,
And scraped off the numbers in search of the cash.

"We've won," he cried happily, loosely displaying
The ticket, which drifted away like a leaf,
And Natalie followed its billowy swaying,
To note where it landed, in shocked disbelief.

"You moron! You idiot!" Natalie, screaming,
Went scrambling over the fence like a goat.
A tiger sat licking his whiskers and beaming,
Delighted a morsel was swimming his moat.

She stared at the creature, and reached for the treasure,
And both of them met at the spot where it lay,
And Frank stood and watched them with obvious pleasure,
Saluted the tiger and ambled away.

The zoo people, later, when bringing the dinner,
Discovered a tiger who didn't much care,
A lottery ticket that WASN'T a winner,
Some earrings, a purse, and a wad of brown hair.

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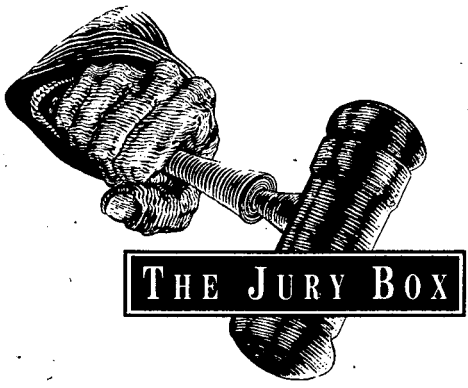

by Jon L. Breen

At one time, a short history of Canadian crime fiction might have been dominated by authors who lived there but were of other nationalities (John Buchan, Ross Macdonald), who left before they made their marks (Margaret Millar), or whose contribution to the field was minor (Stephen Leacock). Not anymore. The current quality and variety of north-of-the-border writers is demonstrated by *The Best of Cold Blood* (Mosaic Press, 85 River Rock Dr., Suite 202, Buffalo, NY 14207; $15.95 Canadian, $12.95 U.S.), selected from the five volumes of that pioneering anthology series by Peter Sellers and John North. The strong collection covers the full range of crime fiction from pure detection (professional and amateur) to crook stories to twist-in-the-tail domestic murder to grim social commentary. Among the thirteen contributors are both editors, *EQMM* favorites William Bankier and James Powell, and celebrated novelists Charlotte MacLeod, Peter Robinson, Ted Wood, and Eric Wright. Two of the best entries are *AHMM* regular Jas. R. Petrin's suspenseful and surprising "Man on the Roof" and Tony Aspler's tattooing tale "The Year of the Dragon."

For the latest and similarly varied novels from some other prominent Canadians, see the first six books discussed below.

*** Howard Engel, *Getting Away with Murder,* Overlook, $22.95. In his ninth case, Grantham, Ontario, private eye Benny Cooperman reluctantly accepts employment from menacing gangster Abram Wise, who wants to know who is trying to kill him. The plot also involves an old domestic murder case revived in a true-crime book by a writer friend of Benny's. As usual, the narrative is humorous, detailed, and leisurely, and the puzzle (elucidated in a *Thin Man*-ish gathering of the suspects) will delight traditionalists. The story starts with a possibly unique fictional murder method, and another of the book's crimes involves a most unusual accessory to homicide. One of the leaders of Canadian crime fiction's 1980s renaissance, Engel is still one of

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the best. This is his first book to be published in the United States since *A Victim Must Be Found* (1989).

*** Alison Gordon, *Prairie Hardball,* McClelland & Stewart, 481 University Ave., Suite 900, Toronto, Ontario M5G 2E0; $26.99 Canadian, $20.95 U.S. In her fifth adventure, Toronto baseball writer Kate Henry returns with cop boyfriend Andy Munro to her small-town roots for a reunion of World War II-era women ballplayers, one of them her mother, who are being inducted into the Saskatchewan Baseball Hall of Fame. Threatening letters followed by murder put a damper on the festivities in a smoothly enjoyable example of the traditional whodunit. Characters and telling are fine, though fair-play clues are scarce.

*** Laurence Gough, *Karaoke Rap,* McClelland & Stewart, $26.99 Canadian, $20.95 U.S. Vancouver cops Jack Willows and Claire Parker, partners both professionally and personally, investigate two related crimes: the kidnapping of a financial promoter and the wounding of Jack's son in a convenience-store robbery. This very well-written and constructed police procedural of the inverted kind is most highly recommended if you relish climactic bloodbaths and find crooks as interesting as cops.

*** Scott Mackay: *Cold Comfort,* Carroll & Graf, $23. Toronto homicide detective Barry Gilbert looks into the freezing-to-death murder of a young woman while trying to save partner Joe Lombardo from a budget-cutting layoff. The twists and turns of the investigation recall the work of procedural master Hillary Waugh. Though Mackay's novel is about even with Gough's purely on literary grounds, readers like me who prefer an absorbing and complex mystery to the tell-all approach will like it better.

*** Nicola Furlong: *A Hemorrhaging of Souls,* Salal Press, P.O. Box 36060, Victoria B.C. V9A 7J5; $8.99 Canadian, $6.99 U.S. Two interesting characters, a school psychologist cum opera singer and a Victoria cop, both products of troubled families, confront a series of apparent suicides of a Catholic girls' school's pupils. Nicely complex and thoroughly readable.

*** Sparkle Hayter: *The Last Manly Man,* Morrow, $22. The fourth case for news network reporter Robin Hudson, a sensible feminist with a sense of humor, is in some ways a prototypical '90s mystery, offering a stand-up-comic sensibility with characters and social observations that are way more important than the plot. In with the one-liners and slapstick are wise insights into men, women, and their relationships. The James Bond-ish story line involves the female-dominant bonobo chimpanzees.

*** Elizabeth Peters: *The Ape Who Guards the Balance,* Avon, $24. The most recent and highly deserving recipient of the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master Award presents the tenth novel about Amelia Peabody Emerson, who shares her early-twentieth-century Egyptological adventures with a large extended

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family. The series, which began with the modern classic *Crocodile on the Sandbank* (1975), may have reached a point of diminishing returns, but the humorous narrative, Amelia's first person alternating with third-person accounts of the younger adventurers, and old-fashioned derring-do will keep the fans happy.

*** Harlan Coben: *One False Move,* Delacorte, $24. Sports agent Myron Bolitar, asked to protect a young woman basketball star who has received threatening letters, does more real detective work than some current amateur sleuths. The tone ranges from the stand-up comic school at its most smartass to overwrought tear-jerking. Bolitar's friend Win, though in deliberate contrast to Spenser's trusty Hawk in many respects, still represents a tiresome contemporary cliché: the hero's dangerously violent, morally ambiguous sidekick. Reservations aside, Edgar-winner Coben lives up to his reputation with a strong narrative drive, a satisfactorily complex and surprising plot, and a solid sense of pace and structure.

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *The Dog Who Bit a Policeman,* Mysterious, $22. Inspector Porfiry Petrovich Rostnikov and his colleagues continue to fight crime in post-Soviet Moscow, their latest adventure concerning illicit dog fighting and a series of killings of Russian mafioso. A master of the modular police procedural, Kaminsky juggles several story lines expertly.

*** Ron Goulart: *Groucho Marx, Master Detective,* St. Martin's, $22.95. Groucho Marx, assisted by a radio-writer Watson, looks into the death of a young actress in 1937 Hollywood. The plot is negligible, but Goulart's sure feel for the period and perfect duplication of the verbal rhythms and off-beat humor of the public Groucho mark him a Marx Brothers scripter born too late. Harpo, Chico, and Zeppo are talked to and/or about but remain off-stage.

*** Max Allan Collins (text) and Richard Piers Rayner (art): *Road to Perdition,* Paradox Press, $13.95. Anyone who grew up with Superman and Batman knows how effectively the graphic novel (i.e., comic-book) format can tell certain types of stories. This violent and shocking fictionalization of a 1930s Depression gangster saga is both deftly constructed and well-drawn, palatable to an adult audience for all its nostalgic BLAMs and RAT-TAT-TAT-TATs. (The publisher is an imprint of DC Comics, 1700 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.)

Speaking of Murder (Berkley, $12), edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, gathers excellent recent interviews with twenty prominent writers of crime fiction plus ace literary agent Dominick Abel. Among the subjects: Stephen King, Joan Hess, Simon Brett, Mickey Spillane, Ian Rankin, Marcia Muller, Bill Pronzini, Elizabeth Peters, and Anne Perry.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE BLANK CARD

by Jeffery Deaver

The little things.

Like the way she'd leave the office at 5:00 but sometimes not get home until 6:20.

He knew his wife was a fast driver and could make the trip in forty-three minutes. He knew because he'd timed it. He'd made the run in her car and along the route he'd found out she liked best, just to be sure the times were accurate. So where did she spend the remaining thirty-seven minutes?

And little things like the phone calls.

He'd come home and find Mary on the phone and, sure, she'd smile at him and blow him a little kiss across the room. But it seemed that the tone of her voice would change as soon as she saw him and she'd hang up pretty damn fast after that. So Dennis would go to take a shower and pretend to forget a clean towel and call for Mary to get one for him, please, honey, and when she disappeared into the basement he'd run into the kitchen and hit redial on the phone. And sometimes it turned out to be a neighbor or Mary's mother. But sometimes nobody picked up. As if they had a code or something—let it ring twice then I'll call back in five minutes.

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And then there was the wine. Sometimes he'd meet her at the door of their spacious Colonial in Westchester County after she'd been out; he'd walk up to her fast and kiss her hard. She'd act surprised and try to turn away. But once or twice he'd smelled wine on her breath. She'd claim she'd been at a church fund-raising meeting at Patty's or Kit's. But do you drink wine at church meetings? Dennis Linden didn't think so.

Dennis's suspicions of his wife were natural. He'd had bad luck with the women in his life before Mary, and not long after their wedding, five years ago, he'd started to keep an eye on her.

A fast writer and a clever one, Jeffery Deaver sold two new novels to Simon & Schuster in 1998. *The Coffin Dancer* hit the bookstores in June, and his latest work, *The Last Night of the Year,* will be available in the summer of 1999. Mr. Deaver is a two-time Readers Award winner and was honored in 1997 with a nomination for the Edgar Allan Poe award for "The Kneeling Soldier," a story published in *EQMM.*

But he hadn't really found any proof until about three months ago, in late September—after Dennis had met his best buddy, Sid Farnsworth, for drinks in White Plains.

"I think she's seeing somebody," Dennis had muttered, hunched over his V&T.

"Who? Mary?" Sid shook his head. "You're nuts. She loves you." The men had known each other since college and Sid was one of the few people who'd be completely straight with Dennis.

"She made this big deal out of going on a business trip to San Francisco last week."

"Whatta you mean, made a big deal? She didn't want to go?"

"No, she *did* want to go. But I wasn't going to let her."

"You weren't going to *let* her? Why?" Sid hadn't understood.

"Go by herself? She'd get into trouble."

"Why d'you think that?"

"'Cause she's a beautiful woman, why else? And she flirts too much."

"Mary?" Sid had frowned. "I've never seen her flirt. Never once. She's just . . . nice. She smiles at everybody."

"That's what I *mean.*"

Sid had sipped his beer, cautiously eyeing his friend. "Listen, Denny, you just can't tell your wife you're not going to let her do anything. That's bad form, man."

"I told her I was sorry and I *did* let her go. But don't you think it was funny? Her getting all upset like that over a trip? Unless she was going to meet somebody."

"Get real."

Dennis hadn't even been listening. "And then I called the hotel

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every night. Couple times she was out until ten or ten-thirty."

Sid had rolled his eyes. "What, she's got a curfew? It was a *business* trip, for Christ's sake. When you're on a trip, how late d'you stay out?"

"That's different."

"Oh yeah, right. Different."

Dennis had said, "I just don't get *why* she'd cheat, anyway. I mean, look at me. I'm only forty-five. I'm in great shape—check out this gut. Solid as a board. Not a single gray hair. I bring home a good paycheck."

"Look, all I know is, if I was married I'd cut my wife a little slack."

"You don't understand," Dennis had responded angrily. "Nobody understands."

"What I understand," Sid had laughed, "is that Mary volunteers for the Homeless Coalition, she's on the church board, she puts together parties like Martha Stewart, and she still works a full-time job. She's a saint."

"Saints can sin, too," Dennis had snapped wryly.

Sid had whispered, "Look, you're so worried about it, check up on her. Keep track of where she's going, how long she's away. Go through her receipts. Look for the little things."

"The little things," Dennis repeated. He smiled. He liked that.

"I tell you, buddy, you're going to feel like an idiot. She's *not* cheating on you."

"Well, she better not be," Dennis had muttered. "She better not be."

But the irony was that Sid's advice didn't clear Mary at all—not in her husband's mind. No, he *found* some little things: The trips home from work that took longer than they should have, the funny tone during her phone calls, the wine on her breath.

And then tonight, a snowy evening two weeks before Christmas, Dennis found a big thing.

It was five-thirty. Mary was still at work and would be late tonight because, she claimed, she had some Christmas shopping to do. Which was fine with him—because Dennis was ransacking their bedroom, searching for something that had been gnawing at him all day.

That morning, just before he'd left for work, Dennis had slipped off his shoes and snuck past the bedroom where Mary was supposedly getting dressed. He did this a lot—just to see if she was making phone calls on the sly or wearing lingerie he thought was too sexy. Dennis peered into the room and saw her take a small red object out of her briefcase and quickly hide it in the bottom drawer of her dresser.

He'd waited a moment then stepped into the bedroom. "How's my tie?" he asked loudly. She'd jumped and spun around. "You scared me," she said. But she recovered fast. She smiled and didn't glance at either the open briefcase or the dresser. Oh, she was good. . . .

"Looks fine to me," she said, adjusting the knot of his tie. She turned back to the closet to finish dressing.

Dennis had sped to his office. He did a little work but spent most of

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the day brooding. He left early, even blowing off a big client, and returned home, where he ran upstairs and ripped open the dresser drawer.

Whatever she'd hidden was gone.

Had she taken it with her? Had she given it to a lover?

Was it his Christmas present?

But, no, she hadn't taken it; after a half-hour of prowling through every conceivable hiding place in the room he found what he'd seen. It was a red Christmas-card envelope. She'd hidden it in the pocket of her black silk robe. There was no name or address on the front.

He cradled the envelope and it seemed to him that the card was a burning ember. His fingers stung from the heat and he could barely lift it, the small cardboard square felt so heavy. He went into the bathroom and locked the door, just in case Mary came home early. He turned the envelope over and over in his hands. A dozen times. Two dozen. He studied it carefully. It was sealed but she hadn't licked the flap completely; he could pry up most of it but one part was firmly fixed and he couldn't get it open without tearing the paper.

He dug under the washbasin, and he found an old razor blade, then spent a half-hour carefully scraping away at the glue on the flap.

At six-thirty, with another inch of flap to go, the phone rang and for once he was actually glad to hear Mary's voice telling him that she'd be later than she thought. She said she'd met a friend at the mall and they were going to stop for a drink on the way home. Did Dennis want to join them?

Oh, that's a nice touch, he thought. I say yes and go to meet them and find out that the friend conveniently left ten minutes before. . . . Think you're pretty smart, don't you?

He told her he was too tired and hurried back to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, he scraped off the last bit of glue and with shaking hands he opened the flap.

He pulled the card out.

On the front was a picture of a Victorian couple, holding hands and looking out over a snowy backyard as candles glowed around them.

He took a deep breath and opened the card.

It was blank.

And Dennis Linden understood that all his fears were true. There was only one reason to give someone a blank card. She and her lover were too afraid of being caught to write anything—even a harmless note. Hell, now that he thought about it, a blank card was far worse than an inscribed one—the understood message was of such deep love and passion that words wouldn't convey what they felt.

He felt sick with anger.

So Mary *was* seeing someone and probably had been for months.

Who?

Somebody at the law firm where she was a paralegal, he bet. It must've been one of the lawyers who'd gone with her to the conference

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in San Francisco. Why had Dennis let her go on the trip? Hell, why'd he let her go back to work in the first place? He should've put his foot down.

Rage consumed him.

He carried the card back to the bedroom. He was going to reseal it as best he could and replace it. But then he thought about where he'd found it. She could have hidden the envelope in any of her clothes but she picked her sexy silk robe. Why? He considered it for a long time and came up with an answer: Because that was what she'd worn after they'd made love some night when Dennis was away on a trip.

He tore the card into a dozen pieces, flung them across the room, then fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a half-hour. Trying to calm.

He couldn't. He kept replaying all the opportunities Mary'd had to cheat on him. Her church bake sales, her drives to the courthouses, her lunch hours, the nights she and Patty (well, she *claimed* it was Patty) would stay in the city after shopping and a play. . . .

How could she do this to him? After everything he'd done for her! He'd put food in her mouth, a roof over her, he'd given her a Lexus. He satisfied her in bed. He struggled continually to keep his temper in check. And the one time he hit her . . . hell, he apologized right after and bought her the Lexus to make up for it. He did all of this for her and she didn't appreciate it one bit.

Lying whore . . .

Then he realized: She was with him now.

A friend she met at the mall.

Dennis stood up. He went to his own dresser and took out something that *he'd* hidden not long ago. A Smith & Wesson .38 revolver.

He pulled on his down jacket—a birthday present from Mary last October, one that she'd probably bought on her way to a hotel to meet her lover—and dropped the gun into his pocket. Outside he climbed into his Bronco and sped down the driveway.

Dennis Linden was nobody's fool.

Of course he knew the location of all the watering holes between Mary's office and the house—places she'd be inclined to stop with a lover. But he also knew where she'd be likely to go on the way home from the mall. He regularly made stops at many of them just to see if he could catch her. He hadn't snared her yet but tonight he felt that luck was on his side.

And he was right.

Mary's black Lexus was parked outside of the Hudson Inn. He knew this place. About a month ago he'd begun wondering if Mary had ever stopped here with a man; it was only ten minutes from the house. He'd asked to see a room, just to get an idea of the sort of place she'd bring a lover. The room was dark and very romantic. He'd nearly grabbed a

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chair and destroyed the place but somehow had managed to keep his temper in check.

Tonight he skidded to a stop in the middle of the driveway and leapt out of the truck. A couple driving toward the exit had to swerve out of his way and they honked at him. He slammed his fist against their window, shouting, "Go to hell!" They stared in terror. He pulled the gun from his pocket and walked up to the window of the inn and peered inside.

Yes, there was his wife: blond, trim, a heart-shaped face. And she was sitting next to her lover.

The man must have been ten years younger than Mary. He wasn't handsome, and he had a belly. How could she be seeing someone like him? How on earth? He didn't look rich either—he was wearing a cheap, unstylish suit. No, there was only one reason to see him. . . . He must be good in bed.

Dennis could taste the familiar metallic flavor of his rage.

And then he realized that Mary was wearing the navy-blue dress that he'd bought for her last Christmas! He'd purposely picked a high-necked one so she couldn't go flaunting her breasts at every man she passed. This is what she'd picked to wear that morning after she'd hidden the Christmas card. He knew she'd picked it as a private joke—an insult to him. Dennis pictured this fat slob slowly undoing the buttons, slipping his pudgy fingers under the cloth while Mary whispered words that he'd see every time he looked at the blank red Christmas card. Dennis wanted to scream.

He spun away from the window and strode to the front door of the inn. He pushed it open and stepped inside, shoving a waiter out of the way. The man fell to the floor.

The maître d' saw the gun and gasped, backing away. Other patrons did too.

Mary glanced at him, still smiling from her conversation with fat boy, then her face went white. "Dennis, honey, what—?"

"Am I doing here?" he raged sarcastically.

The boyfriend lifted his hands. He stumbled backwards and his bar stool fell over.

"I'm here, *honey,*" he shouted, "to do what I should've done a long time ago."

"Dennis, what're you talking about?"

"Who's he?" the chubby man asked, his eyes huge with fear.

"My husband," Mary whispered. "Dennis, please, put the gun down!"

"What's your name?" Dennis shouted at the man.

"I—It's Frank Chilton. I—"

Dennis remembered him. Patty's husband. Mary's good friend from the church committee. She was betraying her friend too.

Dennis lifted the gun.

"No, please!" Frank pleaded. "Don't hurt us!"

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Mary stepped in front of her lover. "Dennis, please put the gun away. Please!"

He muttered, "You cheat on somebody, there's going to be payback. Oh, you bet there is."

"Cheat? What do you mean?" The actress within Mary was looking innocent as a child.

A scream from nearby, a woman's voice. "Frank! Mary!"

Dennis glanced toward the bar and saw a woman about Frank's age freeze as she stepped out of the women's room. A horrified look on her face.

"Get back," the man called. "Honey, please."

But the woman ran to Frank and put her arms around him.

What was going on?

"Who're you?" Dennis asked.

The woman was crying furiously.

"Who?"

Frank shouted, "She's my wife! Leave her alone!"

"But . . . " Dennis was confused. It was *Patty?*

Mary frowned. "Dennis, did you think I was seeing Frank?"

He said nothing.

"I ran into Patty at the mall," she explained. "I told you that. We decided to have a drink and she called Frank. I invited you, too. But you didn't want to come. How could you think—?" She was crying. "How could you—"

"Oh, nice try. I know what you've been up to. Maybe it's not him. But it *is* somebody." He aimed the gun at his wife. "Too many discrepancies, *honey.* Too many things don't quite add up, *honey.*"

"Oh, Dennis, I don't have a clue what you're talking about. I'm not seeing anyone. I love you! I was just out buying you a Christmas present tonight." She held up a shopping bag.

"Did you get me a card too?"

"A—"

"Did you buy me a Christmas card?" he screamed.

"Yes!" More tears. "Of course I did."

"You buy cards for anyone *else?"*

She looked completely confused. "Just the ones we're sending together. To our friends. To my family . . . "

"What about the card you hid in the closet?"

She blinked. "You mean, in my bathrobe?"

"Yes! Who's that one for?"

"It's for *you!* It's your card."

"Then how come it was sealed up and blank?"

The tears had stopped and now anger blossomed in her face. It was an expression he'd seen only twice before. When he'd told her at first he wouldn't let her go back to work and then when he'd refused to let her take that business trip to San Francisco.

"I didn't seal it up," she snapped. "It was snowing yesterday when I

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came out of the Hallmark store. The flap got wet and it stuck. I was going to work it open when I got a chance. I hid it so you wouldn't find it."

He lowered the gun. Debating. Then he smiled coldly. "Oh, you're good. But you're not fooling me." He aimed the pistol at her chest and started to pull the trigger.

"No, Dennis, please!" she cried, lifting her hands helplessly.

"Hold it right there!" a man's voice barked.

"Drop the weapon! Now!"

Dennis spun around and found himself facing two New York state troopers, who were pointing their own guns at him.

"No, you don't understand," he began, but as he spoke the Smith & Wesson strayed toward the cops.

Both officers hesitated for a fraction of a second then fired their guns.

Dennis spent five weeks in the detention-center hospital, during which time several psychiatrists gave him a thorough evaluation. They recommended a sanity hearing prior to trial.

At the hearing, held on a cold, bright day in February, Dennis's long history of depression, uncontrolled temper, and paranoid behavior came to light. Even the prosecutor gave up on the idea of finding him fit to stand trial and conceded that he was incompetent. There was, however, some disagreement about the type of hospital to place him in. The D.A. wanted him committed indefinitely in a high-security facility while Dennis's lawyer urged that he go to an unsecured hospital for six months or so of observation.

The gist of the defense argument was that no one had actually been endangered by Dennis because, it turned out, the firing pin of his gun had been removed and the weapon couldn't be fired. Dennis had known this, the lawyer explained, and had merely wanted to scare people.

But no sooner had he made that point than Dennis leapt up and shouted that, no, he *had* thought the gun was working properly.

"See, the firing pin is the key to the whole case!"

His lawyer sighed in disgust and sat down.

"Can you swear me in as a witness?" Dennis asked the judge.

"This isn't a trial, Mr. Linden."

"But can I talk?"

"All right, go ahead."

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, your honor."

"Have you now?" the bored judge asked.

"Yessir. And I've finally figured it out." Dennis went on to explain: Mary, he told the judge, had been having an affair with Dennis's best friend, Sid, ever since he'd flown out to San Francisco to meet her on a business trip she'd recently taken.

"I know it was Sid 'cause he told me to look for the little things."

"The little things?" the judge inquired.

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"Yes!" Dennis said triumphantly. "And that's just what I started doing. See, they wanted me to find evidence."

They knew he'd try to kill them and that would get Dennis arrested or shot, he continued. "So Mary or Sid took the firing pin out of the gun. It was all a setup."

"You have any proof of this, Mr. Linden?" the judge asked.

Dennis sure did. He read from weather reports showing that it hadn't rained or snowed the day before the assault.

"And why's that relevant?" the judge asked, glancing at Dennis's lawyer, who lifted his eyebrows hopelessly.

His client laughed. "The wet flap, your honor."

"How's that?"

"She really *did* lick the flap of the envelope. It wasn't the snow at all."

"Envelope?"

"She sealed it up to make me think she was going to give it to her lover. To push me over the edge. Then she hid it, knowing I was watching her."

"Uh-huh. I see." The judge began reading files for the next case.

Dennis then gave a long speech, rambling on about the significance of blank messages—about how what is unsaid can often be a lot worse than what's said. "A message like that, or a *non-message,* I should say, would definitely justify killing your wife and her lover. Don't you agree, your honor?"

It was then that the judge had Dennis escorted out of the courtroom and ruled from the bench that he be indefinitely committed in the Westchester County Maximum-Security Facility for the Criminally Insane.

"You're not fooling anyone!" Dennis screamed to his tearful wife as she sat in the back of the courthouse. The two bailiffs muscled him through the door and his frantic shouts echoed through the courthouse for what seemed like an eternity.

It was exactly six months later that the orderly supervising the game room at the mental hospital happened to see in the local newspaper a short notice that Dennis's ex-wife was remarrying—an investment banker named Sid Farnsworth. The article mentioned that the couple was going to honeymoon in San Francisco. The orderly thought about mentioning it to Dennis but then decided it might upset him. Besides, the patient was, as usual, completely lost in a project and wouldn't want to be disturbed. Dennis spent most of his time these days sitting at one of the crafts tables, making greeting cards out of red construction paper. He'd give them to the orderly and ask him to mail them. The man never did, of course; patients weren't allowed to send mail from the facility. But the orderly couldn't have posted them anyway—the cards were always blank. Dennis never wrote any messages inside, and there was never a name or address on the front of the envelope. ●

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Success Without College

by Perri O'Shaughnessy

Paul van Wagoner swiveled in his desk chair, observing the bustle at the Hog's Breath Inn below, indulging himself in a pat on the back. You couldn't pick a more beautiful place on earth than Carmel, California. He'd seen the world, and remained unimpressed. What did Italy have that California didn't have? Ruins? California had missions. London? San Francisco had sexier water. Well, okay, there was no Indian Himalaya to climb. But from his front door, it was five hours to the Sierra, max. Here he could enjoy a sea as blue as the Mediterranean and beaches lounged upon by people as cosmopolitan as any in Paris.

Department of First Stories authors Mary and Pamela O'Shaughnessy, a.k.a. "Perri," have a series of four novel-length mysteries to their credit. In 1997, the paperback edition of the second book, *Invasion of Privacy,* made the *New York Times* bestseller list. The thousands of fans who made that success possible will be glad to know that book three in the series, *Obstruction of Justice,* is now out in paperback, and book four, *Breach of Promise,* has just been released in hardcover. ¶

He had started his morning with a steaming espresso for breakfast, at a sunlit cafe, and finished it up with a few phone calls to organize his subcontractors. He would leave about four, he decided, and take a long, fast walk up the beach, get his feet wet, let the waves bury his feet and the sand crabs tickle his toes. In the late afternoon on a glorious blue-on-blue day like today, all the pretty women would still be out baring their midriffs to the air and his gaze. He didn't want to miss that. And now that he had his own business, he could do as he pleased on any fine afternoon.

After spending years getting educated on the East Coast, he loved everything about California. Even crime paid here, for him as it did for Hollywood. California could transform the most venal crime into a song and dance and success for somebody.

He liked his work. He dealt in issues of life and death. What could be more important? And if lately the rest of his life seemed less vital than usual, well, that was subject to change. That could be remedied instantly with a certain sway of the right someone's hip.

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Today, he had new clients coming in at two o'clock, the Maldonados, Victor and Delilah. They were parents whose son had been shot four times, allegedly by a drive-by shooter. In the hospital now, in intensive care, the teenager was just barely alive. When Paul spoke on the phone to the parents right after the incident, their son had not been expected to live.

Matter-of-fact people who never expected a tragedy to blow their simple dreams for their son and themselves sky high, he could tell the Maldonados had gone through several phases by the time they called him, using voices calm and hopeful. They had entered the denial phase, one that Paul recognized all too well. Years ago in Nepal, Paul had seen a woman hang a strip of cotton with inked messages on it onto a line, next to a dozen others, multicolored, at various stages of fading. She hung it there as a message to a presumably benevolent god. As the flag faded, her god absorbed the message. The Maldonados had been hanging out their prayer flag, not giving up. He didn't know what to expect from them this morning.

He poured himself another jolt of coffee for fortification. This part of his job could get him down.

Victor Maldonado entered the room first. His wife trailed in behind. They sat side by side in his client chairs, not touching, but bouncing thoughts off each other the way married people do, flinging questions and arguments his way. He imagined they'd been married for a very long time. The wife's whole milk-colored face seemed to be a frame for a generous mouth with perfectly straight white teeth. Her skin had lost its youthful flush, and lines ran along the edges of her lips, but the lines told Paul about a life full of laughter and smiles.

She didn't smile now; the face that was made to smile looked painfully tense. Her husband sat close by, tall and dark and round around the middle, his voice booming and his body movements closely aligned to hers, responsive to her nuances, physical and verbal. They were close, Paul could see that. Good. They needed each other now. Roman, the shooting victim, nineteen years old, was their only son.

"How's Roman?" Paul asked.

"We called this morning," said Victor. "They took him out of intensive care. The doctor said he was 'cautiously optimistic.'"

"Great," Paul said, surprised. He had steeled himself for bad news, he realized now, as the tension in his neck relaxed, and he felt the ache of holding it stiff for the past few minutes. How amazing to be shot four times and hang in there anyway. Good for Roman. He asked them to fill him in on the events surrounding Roman's shooting.

They explained that he had been working for two months at Taylor's corner store, north, up near Gilroy, being paid under the table, in cash.

"We can't afford college, even though he really wants to go." Roman's mother spoke in a voice loaded with regret and guilt. "We have just enough on paper so nobody would give him the financial aid he needed and his test scores were okay but not great. He was sick the day of the

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test, and too demoralized to try again. He's actually a smart kid. Always got real good grades. I worry about what's going to happen to him. You can't get anywhere today without a college education."

"Don't beat yourself up about that anymore, Delly. He'll get there. Have a little faith."

Delilah adjusted her purse on her knees. "Victor buys twenty bucks worth of faith every week. Thanks to the lottery, he dreams away our bills, our bad health . . ."

"Our mortgage," teased her husband, shrugging, looking okay with the characterization.

"Lord," she said to Paul, "if dreams were real."

"So your son went to work to save money for college?" Paul prompted.

"So he got this dumb job that hardly kept him in black T-shirts. He never meant to stay long, just until he could get something that paid better and had some benefits," said Victor.

"He should've been looking for a better job then, shouldn't he have?" his wife said. "None of this would have happened if he had a decent job. Roman's green. He thinks he can play around and everything will turn out right anyway."

"Nothing wrong with being young and expecting a lot of the world, Delly," her husband said. "Keeps the spirit happy and engaged."

"His boss, Bert Taylor, has owned that store for twenty years. Now he claims Roman never worked there, that he's always run the place on his own," Delilah went on. "But why in the world would Roman make up a job?"

Paul could think of a few reasons. Maybe Roman had another way of making money he felt shy talking about, or maybe he just wanted out from under his mother's eagle eye for a few minutes every day.

"I can't see why it makes a difference," Victor said with exasperation. "They found Roman lying out front, didn't they? It's nothing to do with his job."

"He's not out of the woods yet, the doctors say," said Delilah, reality breaking through as her flag faded but her wishes remained unfulfilled. "He could still take a turn. . . . I can't stand to think . . ."

"Did you talk with Roman's boss, with Taylor, after the accident?" Paul asked.

"Went over to the store when Roman got shot, on Sunday," Delilah said. "The ambulance had just gone. We were going to hustle over to the hospital, but they said he wasn't expected to make it. We needed a minute . . . our son's blood was on the sidewalk and Taylor was inside doing all the normal end-of-the-day stuff. Wiping counters, tidying. You know. It seemed so strange to me."

"You shouldn't have yelled at him, Delly," her husband said, looking softly on his wife.

"No, I guess not. But my son nearly died in front of his store and he's so concerned about all that blood on his precious sidewalk."

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"People don't know what to say," said Victor. "Keeping busy helps. You know that."

"But Roman wouldn't lie to his mother," Mrs. Maldonado said, getting a little weepy.

Putting an arm around his wife, Victor gave Paul a look. The brown depths of his eyes told Paul he knew their son better than his wife did. All sons lied to their mothers, they admitted.

"Have you talked to Roman since he was shot? Is he conscious?"

Victor Maldonado picked up the thread while his wife sniffed into a tissue. "He is. He's foggy about what happened. They say it's a miracle he's survived. Nobody expected it. The police said they'd send someone over to see him today, see if he remembered anything helpful about the car."

"We're going over there to see our boy right now," piped Delilah. Obviously relieved by her tears. More relaxed, ready to reenter the fray.

Paul decided to tag along. He could walk down to the water tomorrow.

He followed the Maldonados in his car to the hospital in Monterey, met them in front, and walked with them up slippery floors to Roman Maldonado's room. The boy's parents kissed him gently. His mother smoothed the hair off of his broad, wet forehead. A mouth as wide as his mother's, but wrecked and torn in the fall, was patched together with neat black rows of stitches ending in small knots. The couple introduced Paul, and left their son with promises to return shortly. Until Paul knew if the kid was lying, the parents were better occupied elsewhere.

Roman lay on the bed, his muscular body so long his feet hung off the end. Thick white bandages broke the dark expansive skin of his chest, a sheet furled down around his waist, and his eyes remained closed.

"Roman, I just want to ask you a couple of questions about what happened, okay?"

Roman nodded slightly, opening his eyes.

"You know you've been shot?"

He nodded.

"Were you clerking at Taylor's store yesterday?"

He nodded again.

"He paid you in cash?"

"Yes." He groaned. The puffy red lips strained against their stitches.

"We'd like to find out if you saw the person in the car. Do you remember anything about that person? Or the car? What color was it?"

The boy's face, splotched white and red, screwed up. "What car?" he asked.

"You remember going outside right before you got shot?"

He shook his head, eyes wide open now, looking perplexed.

"You don't remember going outside?"

The word came out simple and clear. Dang, no memory of the incident. Well, these things sometimes came back with time.

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"I never went outside. There was no car."

Paul looked at him for a moment, hands in his pockets, pondering the many lies he had told his mother and other inquisitive adults while he was growing up. Then he said, "You know you're in intensive care, Roman? You know how badly hurt you are?" He didn't add, they took four bullets out of you yesterday and you could die any minute.

From Roman's face, his father's clear brown eyes told Paul that Roman knew he could die.

"Who shot you?"

"I never saw him before."

"Okay. Then what happened in the store that day?"

But Roman had closed his eyes again and sunk back into his pain. He stiffened his body in the bed as if preparing for some private ordeal.

Paul pushed a button to call the nurse, who took the time to frown at him on the way to her patient.

Well, thought Paul, a mystery. He trotted off to bribe a talkative cop.

He invited Armano Hernandez out for a beer after his shift.

They met at five that evening at the Pine Inn, a few blocks from Paul's office. A decade younger than Paul, around thirty, Hernandez had worked under Paul when he had managed a special homicide task force a few years before. Small and agile, with fine features, a handsome and funny guy who loved being a cop, Hernandez took Paul's place when Paul left in minor disgrace. Hernandez seemed to feel he owed Paul something, and although Paul couldn't agree, he found Armano's loyalty both touching and useful.

Hernandez needed two beers and several long minutes to vent his misgivings about sharing cop business with Paul, the latest fracas between himself and Chief Carsey, and a brief update on the ongoing soap opera starring his younger sister Lena before settling into a conversation.

"There's two things you got to remember, van Wagoner," he started out. He never intended to patronize Paul, but to him and to all of his friends on the police force, Paul fell into that category of pitiable creatures, cops without a badge. Once an ex-cop, always a disreputable failure. "Number one, the parents know nothing. Correction: The dad knows more than the mom and he doesn't know shit. Number two, when you're talking a nineteen-year-old boy who's got nothing going for him, assume a drug connection."

That said, he apparently felt he had imparted something valuable, for he tossed a handful of nuts down his throat, crunched forcefully, and smacked his lips.

Paul liked Armano. He only hated the way he ate. "What's the blood evidence, Armano?" he asked eventually, giving him the chance to polish off a second handful.

"Forensics took some off the sidewalk, all his. No evidence of a fight. Nothing under his fingernails. Nothing like that. Just four messy shots."

"They find the casings?"

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"Yeah, two lying on the ground near him. Two they removed in surgery. All from the same weapon, a thirty-eight. One funny thing. One of the slugs had a partial print on it. Turned out to be Taylor's. He said when he got outside and saw all the blood, he picked it up without thinking. With all the TV, you'd think people would know better."

"That's worth looking into."

"Taylor didn't shoot the kid. Roman would say so right off the bat."

"Your people go inside the store?"

"Had to interview the owner in there. The store's kept really nice—you been in there? Painted blue all around the top of the walls with some nice-looking murals of fruit. He's got the veggies laid out in these little plastic things that look like grass, and he buys his produce from farms in Salinas so it's good fresh stuff. Not only is it sweet-lookin', it's clean as a whistle. The guy takes a lot of pride in his business."

"What's he like? Taylor?"

"Normal. Businesslike. Trying to make money and stay out of trouble. We talked to a few of the people around that day. Nobody admitted knowing Roman but they might lie to stay out of it, or to protect Taylor. Then again, the store's on a busy street. I don't know how much repeat business the guy gets. Roman says he worked oddball hours, so he might not be noticed in particular. We're believing Taylor until we've got a good reason to believe Roman instead."

"Why don't you believe Roman? He says he worked there. Seems like a strange story."

"Look, it wouldn't surprise me if Taylor slipped the kid a few bucks under the table and lied about that. He doesn't want to have any run-ins with the tax man. But, it's a fact that Roman got shot. It's a fact we found the kid lying on the sidewalk in front of the store. Whether he worked for Taylor or not is moot. He ran into someone who went joy-riding with a pistol. I'm not even sure the kid's lying intentionally about being out there on the street. That kind of shock is bound to upset anyone. Now there was a theory floating around . . ."

"What theory?"

"Seems the owner complained to the cops several times about people taking potshots at his store. He's white operating in a neighborhood where he's a minority. Maybe there is some tension. Maybe that's why he might hire Roman, who's at least partly Hispanic. But he says in this case, the guys pulled up, aimed at Roman, and shot. It's nothing to do with him. 'Course, if Taylor knew someone had a grudge and came after him he might lie."

"Any estimate as to how far away the perp was when he fired?"

"Close. Maybe six, eight feet."

"Did he see the car?"

"Actually, no. Says he was in back. Just heard a car tear away when he came running out."

"What are my chances of getting something out of the medical examiner?"

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"She's got a soft spot for you, Paul. All the muchachas do. I've been meaning to ask you about that . . ."

"Armano, you don't need any tips from me. I'm a two-time loser with wives."

"Who said anything about marriage, besides my mother?"

Paul jogged on the beach the next morning, working up a good sweat, running along Carmel Beach toward the downtown, circling back, and running to the foot of Thirteenth. He was good and tired before he saw Susan Misumi making her way down a hillside pathway to the beach, dragged by a diminutive dog, a royal blue sweatshirt hood covering her head.

A woman of regular habits, she usually walked the beach very early in the morning. She was late. He must have run an extra mile. He'd skip tomorrow without guilt. He waved and ran toward her, slowing his pace.

"Son of a gun. It's been awhile. Paul, right? After you quit I thought you'd be heading back up to San Francisco."

"Where there's money, there's crime. Plenty of work for me right here. I could mention you're still here." He tried to catch his breath. He didn't feel very smooth with Susan. She was a type he found hard to understand, a woman happy in a man's job.

"Like you said, crime pays." She fell into step with him. They walked toward a large piece of driftwood and sat on it side by side. Small and delicate-looking, Susan did not look strong enough to cut through bone. "And I like my job." Her dog, a brindled Lhasa apso, began a frantic search for something, flinging sand in all directions.

Paul moved out of the line of fire. "What got you interested in forensics?"

"In med school I quickly discovered my fatal flaw: I'm damned squeamish about cutting into living, breathing bodies. With dead people, you do no damage."

She looked up at Paul, grinning. "I've seen you on the beach a couple of times before but you have that don't-bug-me-I'm-communing-with-nature look."

"Probably just in a hurry to answer nature's call."

Her dog must have known the meaning of the phrase. He raised his leg against the log a foot past Paul. Paul stood up and moved away. "Whew. Dangerous neighborhood."

"Speaking of which . . ." Susan said, apparently recognizing the lack of coincidence in their meeting.

"I'm working for Roman Maldonado's family. I wondered if you'd mind sharing a little of what's on your mind in that case."

"Oh yes. What a mess. A drive-by, according to the police. Always hard to find those guys, unless they're dumb enough to brag about it. Amazing how many do."

"Did you go to the scene?"

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"No. Earl Cummings from our office went over there because the owner of the store said the boy that was shot was dead. From what Earl said, and from the photographs, there's a problem with the blood at the scene."

"What's that?"

"There's blood on the sidewalk. Just not much. Strange, isn't it, when the kid got shot four times?"

"You think he was shot somewhere else and brought there?"

"No sign of blood in the store or the alley nearby. The first cop to arrive did a thorough survey of the area."

"How soon after the shooting did Earl get there?"

"About an hour. Should have been sooner. I've got a regular beef about that with Chief Carsey." She leaned over and scratched her dog behind the ears. His head moved ecstatically along with her fingers while his little body remained alert, the picture of eager anticipation. She got up. "Gotta go. Can't keep a good dog waiting."

She took off down the beach. Paul waved once more and then allowed his eyes to snap his standard body shot. She had good legs, muscular and balletic, a small waist, and long, developed arms. Susan was stronger than she looked. When she'd scratched the dog, Paul wanted to offer himself up for a good scratch, too. He watched her break into a carefree run. That woman probably plucked hearts out of men by the dozen. This level of cool he could never quite approve.

After he had showered and dressed, he fired up his van and headed up 101 to Gilroy in a good mood, playing the radio and enjoying the cloud show on the green hills and dales flanking the freeway. He stopped at Chevy's for a breakfast burrito and drove up the hill toward Taylor's store. Parking in front, he noted the freshly painted angled spots and meticulously clean, well-swept walkway in front. No trees marred the shining asphalt with their leaves. Here, concrete reigned.

Armano hadn't exaggerated. Bert Taylor's market was definitely a cut above the average corner store. The windows sparkled, the floors shined. The area behind the counter looked like something organized and maintained by Paul's scrupulous Dutch grandmother, who had never made her peace with all the dirt in the world.

A woman with a baby in a stroller monopolized the man behind the counter for a good ten minutes, trying to decide between what looked to be identical jumbo plastic packages of disposable diapers. One pass by the stroller, and Paul stayed away. Baby needed those diapers badly and had made bad use of them. Baby agreed, letting loose with a murderous howl. Her mother and the clerk ignored her, unconsciously adjusting the volume of their voices to be heard. Mom decided to take both packages, and then had the long job of figuring out how to carry them and push a stroller with an hysterical child at the same time.

"Bert Taylor?" Paul asked after she was out of screaming distance.

"That's my name," said the clerk. Very tall, he would have been fairly good-looking except for a jaw that ended somewhere around his knees. The long face held an easy grin.

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Paul introduced himself as an investigator. Taylor didn't ask him for further ID, assuming him to be yet another agent of law enforcement coming around to hear his story for the millionth time. Paul did not disabuse him of the notion, secretly marveling at how accepting people were when they shouldn't be.

Taylor was very interested in Roman's condition. "I coulda sworn that boy was dead as a doornail," he said in amazement. "I guess if you're here, he's not talking much. He remember what happened?"

"He's still confused. But he'll come out of it." Paul didn't know if that was true, but he watched for a reaction and missed it when Taylor turned away to adjust something on a shelf behind him.

Paul began to ask him a few questions, which Taylor answered. As they talked, Taylor moved stock on shelves, dusted for invisible dust, rearranged a sagging sign that read, "If you look under 100 years old, we want to see your ID for liquor purchases," and sprayed his counter with what smelled like poison gas, wiping it all down with an immaculate new sponge.

"One hundred?" Paul asked. "That's about how old I feel some days. You wouldn't really ID me, would you?"

"No," said Taylor.

"So why the sign?" Paul persisted.

"I put that sign up so maybe some people would quit making such a stink. You'd think they'd be flattered I want to check their ID, but they get really ticked off."

The man's sudden show of anger piqued Paul's interest. "Ticked off enough to shoot someone?"

"No!" Taylor looked shocked. "That's ridiculous."

"So why make such a big deal about ID?"

"The penalties for selling to minors are fierce. Plus, I'm not about to get in trouble so some sixteen-year-old can get loaded on my beer and crack up his mom's car."

Taylor wouldn't admit that Roman Maldonado had worked for him, although he did admit that if he had, he probably wouldn't say so. He said there were some rowdies who'd threatened him about being in the wrong neighborhood, but he wasn't about to cop to bullies. He'd opened a "dialogue," he said, and was working on making friends in the neighborhood. In general, he appeared to be a good-natured guy with nothing to hide. Only when he talked about Roman did he show his defensiveness.

"Look, I've seen him around, okay? I can't keep the kids from hanging around in front of the store. It's public property once they are out there. I've tried chasing them off, but I don't like to alienate anybody, especially potential customers. I turn a blind eye. But some of them are out there selling drugs, I know it and you do, too." He looked hard at Paul. "I bet you experimented when you were young. Most kids do."

"You're saying he was mixed up in a drug deal gone bad?"

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"I wouldn't suggest that. I'm just trying to help you out, help you understand. He didn't work for me. If he had an income, that's one way people get it around here."

"When the Maldonados came by, you said you didn't know Roman. You lied, Bert. Why'd you lie?"

"They were upset. They remember wrong."

Paul wondered if they did.

On the way out of Taylor's, Paul ran into the stroller. Baby now sat quietly, calm as a cow chewing her cud, face covered with chocolate.

"Taylor sure keeps the store nice," Paul said to the baby's mother.

"Yeah, I hardly recognized it today. I'm here at least once a week. You notice when things change." She riffled for something in a voluminous straw bag, found what she was looking for, and brought out a crumpled cigarette.

"He really fixed it up, huh?"

"When he bought it, he put in the fresh food and painted the inside. I noticed today, the place is real clean."

"Ever see a big kid named Roman working the counter in there?"

"I don't want to get Bert into trouble."

"Kid got shot here a couple of days ago. Bert said it was a drive-by."

"Here?"

"Right in front of the store."

"Shit," she sighed, lighting up. "Might as well go out smoking."

Long shadows crept along the street, shading the building opposite Paul's office, blurring as twilight hinted its approach. The shoppers were going home. If he wanted to make his evening walk on the beach, he would have to hurry. The thought, which ordinarily made him happy, irritated him for a moment. He didn't like routines. And he was tired of walking alone.

He called Taylor's insurance company, then pumped a workers' compensation lawyer he knew in Salinas for information. He had tried earlier in the day to talk with Roman again, but had another brief unenlightening conversation. The boy was in pain and too sick to talk on the phone.

But Paul was satisfied he had a solution. This wasn't the standard whodunit. The facts in the case had been deliberately muddied but he thought he knew now what had happened to Roman Maldonado.

Hurrying to his car, he clocked his trip to the hospital at four minutes. A record.

Up in intensive care, Roman lifted himself out of his fog long enough for Paul to hammer the final nail in his solution: Taylor had a baseball bat he resorted to in a pinch to cool down hotheaded patrons.

He made the trip back up to Taylor's store, only once having to slip out of cruise control when a middle-aged flea marketeer cut him off at the Red Barn intersection.

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"You again," Taylor greeted him. "Like Columbo. 'Oh, let me ask you one last thing.'" He laughed.

"That's right." Paul smiled. "I'm back and I'm bad."

"What's on your mind?"

The store was quiet, perhaps as quiet as the day Roman got shot. "Where are all your customers?"

"They come in waves. Sometimes we get ten people, then nobody for ten minutes."

"That way on Sunday?"

"Always is."

"That's right. There were no eyewitnesses. It was just you and Roman here, all alone. Just you two and a little under-the-table job, and a baseball bat." Paul strolled around picking a few things off the shelf, placing them carefully, neatly back. Behind the counter, he caught sight of the bat. "Self-made man," said Paul.

"That's right," Taylor said, wanting to throw him out but nervous about it. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Self-sufficient. Hate hiring people. Bet you get worked up around tax time. Want to keep the government out of your business. Avoid insurance like the plague."

"Who doesn't?"

"I like that sign you've got in your window there. 'Survival of the fittest.' I've got to get me one of those."

"Something I can help you find?" Taylor said impatiently.

"You know, I don't think so. This last thing I want to see here, I'll swear you haven't got."

It took him a long time to wear Taylor down, but in the end he admitted it. Taylor just didn't carry what Paul was looking for.

The Maldonados were due in his office at about four o'clock. Stuck at a long light, he spent an extra minute on the return trip there, and ran up the stairs to make up the time. He was going to have to stop all these little games he played, find something a little more satisfying than competing against himself.

Puffing hard and inspired by the thought, he punched in the number for the medical examiner. Since that morning on the beach, he had thought a lot about Susan Misumi and that pipsqueak dog of hers.

She wasn't part of his grand plan, but dreams had a way of changing on you.

"Fancy an evening walk?" he asked.

She did.

The Maldonados arrived on the button. They took seats across from Paul. The long afternoon light from the window behind his desk slanted through blinds, striping their faces gold and gray.

"Did Roman tell you anything? We can't get him to talk. His mother cries when she goes there. It's tough, seeing him like that."

"He's confused about the details of what happened," Delilah said. "He

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remembers working behind the counter and he's sure he never stepped out that front door. Says he always used the back door. Too many smokers and winos hung around in front."

"So what the hell happened?"

"Victor!" his wife reprimanded.

"I'll send you a written report," Paul said. "But this was no drive-by shooting. There was no spatter on the wall, and at least some of the blood he lost ended up somewhere besides the sidewalk in front of Taylor's store."

The parents looked at him, flummoxed. The father slammed his open hand down on the Formica. "Taylor shot him! I didn't like him the moment I saw him."

"No. Taylor didn't shoot him. Roman says it was someone he didn't know. But Taylor's got plenty to answer for."

"Well, then . . . ?"

"Here's my take on it. Number one problem: Not enough blood on the sidewalk. That's easy. Roman was shot inside the store. Number two problem: Where's the blood? Well, we've got an immaculate store all of a sudden. Taylor's been mopping and scrubbing like a maniac. You said the day your son was shot, you got there and Taylor was cleaning. He probably had cleared away the blood seconds after Roman got shot right there behind the counter. Problem three: Who shot him? I don't think it was someone Roman knew. I don't think it had anything to do with drugs. I think Roman got shot the same way most people get shot in convenience stores. He got shot during an attempted robbery.

"My guess? It was a young-looking customer, a nervous one. Maybe put a six-pack on the counter, thinking he'd get your son to open the register, then he'd make his move. But the owner's been on the warpath about selling to underage drinkers. Your son demands some ID, which is not something a thief is eager to show. The thief balks."

"Roman would stand up to the guy," Victor said sadly. "He's got a temper."

"So, okay, at this point Roman's already defensive, maybe a little mad. The customer looks young. Maybe he's a little fellow. And Roman's big, intimidating. Roman says Taylor keeps a baseball bat under the counter in case things get rowdy. So, let's say Roman reaches under the counter. Anyway, for that reason or some other one, the would-be thief gets nervous and pulls a gun. Your son gets shot. Happens all the time."

"It doesn't make sense. They found him outside."

"That slowed me down a little, too. That's where your friend Taylor came in. He moved him."

"He dragged Roman outside?" asked Roman's horrified mother, "after someone shot him?"

"Let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He thought Roman was already dead."

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"But why would he do that, Mr. van Wagoner? Why leave our son dead on the sidewalk?"

"Bert Taylor didn't carry workers' compensation insurance. He knew he'd be liable if your son was shot in his store. Outside, he might be able to avoid any financial responsibility. He's not a murderer. He's just another small-businessman trying to protect himself. Almost everybody lies to save money. He figured your son was dead already, so why invite trouble?"

"My God!"

"My ex-fellow cops are over there right now. I'm sure Bert will be persuaded to help them identify the person who shot your son. He probably saw the whole thing."

"They better catch him," said Delilah, "before I do. Boys with guns. I never let Roman play with guns."

"By the way, I had a talk with Roman's doctor," Paul said. "In spite of being shot from a few feet away, the shooter missed anything vital. He says Roman's strong as a prizefighter. He'll be out of the hospital in no time."

"Without a job to go to," worried his mother.

"No troubles on that score now. Taylor will make it up to him," Paul said.

"If he can't even afford insurance, we're not going after Bert Taylor," said Victor. "We don't want to put him out of business or anything. What he did was really low, but he didn't actually harm our boy."

"Oh, but Taylor can afford insurance. He just prefers to put his money into real estate. He owns miles of coastline south of Carmel."

"He can help us with Roman's medical bills?"

"I'll give you the name of a fine workers' comp attorney in Salinas who will make sure Mr. Taylor takes care of all Roman's needs for now and for a significant chunk of the future, guaranteed."

"You mean . . ." Delilah began, but her husband interrupted.

"Hot damn!" cried Victor Maldonado, knocking the chair over as he stood up. "Roman's going to college!" ●

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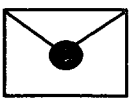

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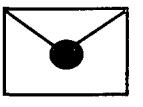

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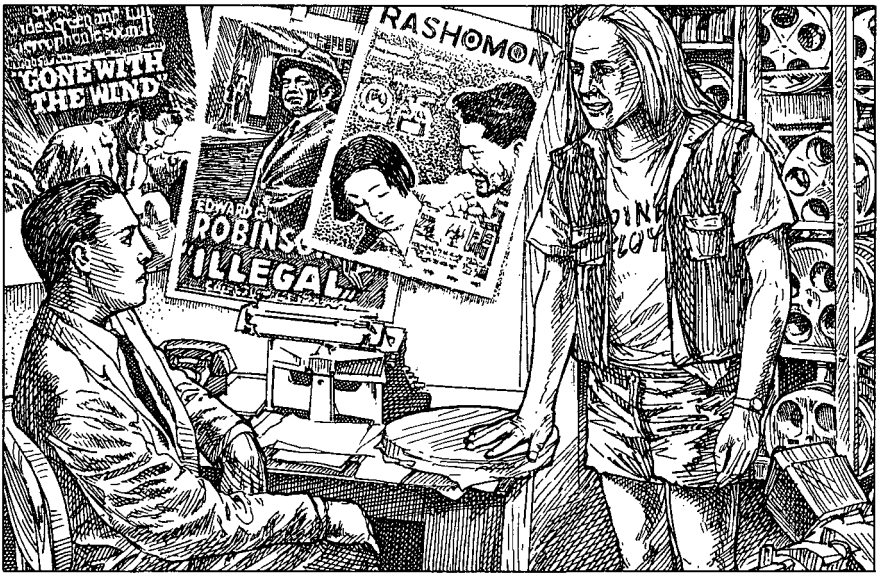

Art by Allen Davis

DIRECTOR'S CUT

by Loren D. Estleman

Justin Ring sat beside a table on the edge of the Olympic-size pool behind his house in Beverly Hills, but he wasn't taking the sun. In his terry robe, sandals with socks, sail-brimmed straw hat, mirrored glasses, and full beard, he exposed almost no skin as he sipped from a glass he refilled occasionally from a pitcher of vodka and orange juice under the umbrella. As he weighed nearly three hundred pounds, none of it muscle, his visitor didn't regret the cover-up.

"I'm Valentino," said the newcomer, stopping before the table with his back to the sun. "Thanks for taking the time to see me, Mr. Ring."

Ring's watery eyes studied him above the rims of his glasses. "You look a little like the Great Lover, at that. I suppose you cultivate the resemblance."

"Just the opposite; or I try. My hair's too straight to hold a perm, and I can't change my Italian ancestry. Mostly it's an embarrassment."

"You're from UCLA, you said." End of chitchat.

"I'm with the Film Preservation Department. We have a nearly complete collection of the pictures you directed. You ought to come take a look sometime."

"I've seen them all."

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"So have I, and I daresay more times even than you. There's no getting around it, sir; I'm a Justin Ring fan, ever since I saw *Fear the Wicked* the first time on the late show when I was in high school."

"I tried to get out of that contract. In the end I needed the money to finish *Ibsen.* That died. *Fear the Wicked* lives, on cable and video and every time some chucklehead decides to put together a Ring festival. Is it any wonder I retired?"

Valentino had heard the retirement was less than voluntary. He also thought the Ibsen biopic pretentious and dull. Aloud he said, "Actually, there's one Ring film I haven't seen, and neither has anyone else in forty years. That's the reason I called for this appointment."

Film detective Valentino, featured in "Director's Cut," has now appeared in three short stories, "which according to my definition," says the author, "entitles me to call this a series." It is a series close to the author's heart, for he is obviously a movie buff, just like Valentino. He is also the author of the well-known Amos Walker private-eye novels, numerous historical Westerns, and several critically acclaimed mainstream novels. ¶

"My student film."

"No one who appeared in it has come forward, and the only person who saw it besides you is dead. That was your instructor for the course."

"There were three in the cast. Two died, and here sits the third. I always was my favorite lead."

"UCLA has cleared a generous offer for a print for our archives. You can accept it in cash or donate the film and deduct the amount from your taxes."

"No."

"You haven't heard the amount."

Ring topped off his glass. "You know about my tax problems or you wouldn't have suggested a charitable deduction. It couldn't possibly be enough to offset my debt to the IRS. But that's moot. The film doesn't exist. I burned every print and the negative years ago."

"That's a common ploy to close discussion," Valentino said. "The true *auteur* rarely destroys his work, regardless of its merit. It's like killing one of his children."

"Thank God I never had any. They'd have sided with my ex-wives. Sorry you wasted a trip, Mr. Chaney."

"Valentino. Chaney was the horror star."

"Valentino was pretty horrible in *Son of the Sheik."* Ring chuckled. "I'm through with the movie business, or rather it's through with me. The industry has no room for ageing legends. I'm preparing to sail my launch around the world. Fifty-foot waves and a typhoon at sea hold no

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fears for someone who's dealt with studio accountants. Who is it, Ki?"

The white-coated houseboy who had shown Valentino to the pool materialized at his elbow. Ki was far from a boy: After a heavy rainstorm, the cracks and seams in his ancient Asian face might have held enough water for a desert journey. "Mister Cortez." He thrust a cordless telephone at his employer.

Ring snatched it from him as if it were a gun. "Goodbye, Valentino."

The visitor strode toward the house. As he turned into the flagstone walk that led to the street, he saw that the director was just then raising the receiver to his ear.

They didn't talk again. Three months later, Justin Ring's motor launch, the *D. W. Griffith,* lost radio contact with Australia and was believed to have broken up on the Great Barrier Reef. Rescue craft found splinters of wreckage, but no Ring. All the producers who had refused to finance his later films turned out for the memorial services in Hollywood. One wept for the CNN cameras.

All this happened eight years ago. In the meantime,Valentino was promoted to head the Film Preservation Department at UCLA. His reputation as a bloodhound who sniffed out traces of long-lost celluloid treasures gave birth to an indulgence: He had business cards printed identifying him as a "film detective." He kept his small office, however, explaining that he had enough trouble finding items he'd mislaid without broadening his options. Working out of that cramped venue, Valentino had brought to light nineteen motion pictures whose recovery the cinematic world had despaired of, and was in the process of restoring an additional five.

When the man whose visit would catapult him back eight years knocked on his door, the film detective was in fact deeply ensconced in 1920. Twenty-two feet of the silent feature *Sherlock Holmes*— the key scene between John Barrymore's Holmes and Gustav von Seyffertitz's Professor Moriarty— were jumping and stuttering through the Movieola on his desk. The footage, inexpertly spliced and spotted orange with oxidation, was nevertheless the only significant portion that had surfaced since talkies came in.

Muttering resentment at the interruption, Valentino rewound the reel carefully and placed it in the custom-designed, climate-controlled miniature vault he ruefully referred to as his $12,000 Frigidaire. Then he opened the door to a tall, slender specimen of over-the-hill Malibu surf bum: balding in front, with shoulder-length hair tinted and beautifully styled, and a comfortably threadbare silk sportcoat over a Pink Floyd T-shirt and faded Wrangler's. He wore sandals on his bony bare feet.

"Valentino? Man, who's your plastic surgeon?" The man's gaze flicked from his face to Rudolph Valentino's on the framed poster for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* on the wall behind the desk— the histo-

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rian's one self-deprecating nod to his immortal namesake—just in case the joke wasn't clear.

Valentino smiled tolerantly. His visitor had a brown paper bundle under one arm. He wondered if this was a marijuana delivery sent to the wrong address. "This is the faculty floor," he said. "I think you want the student lounge downstairs."

"Not unless the movie guy's there. I got something for him." He patted the bundle, which might have contained film reels.

"I'm the movie guy, but if that's your answer to *Endless Summer,* I'm not in the business."

"My name's Elmo Kirdy. You knew my uncle, I think. Justin Ring?"

Valentino searched the man's face, but could see no resemblance to the obese, bearded saurian of Ring's later years. Perhaps there was a little to photographs taken on the set when he was the *enfant terrible* of a different Hollywood. "I wasn't aware he had any blood relatives."

"Neither was he, apparently, for all the attention he paid my mother, his own sister. He didn't even come to her funeral."

Kirdy's bitter tone made Valentino suspect he'd hacked out a *Mommie Dearest* documentary out of old home movies. The town was full of spoiled industry brats looking to cash in on celebrated dead relatives. He decided to get rid of this one. "I tried to acquire your uncle's student film for the university. He turned me down. That was our only meeting."

"Do you still want it?"

He'd started to close the door. Upon a moment's reflection, he held it for Kirdy to enter. He tried to keep his eyes off the package as the visitor looked around the room, cluttered with film cans, videotapes, and books on cinema history. "I thought you were the big muckety-muck." He sounded disappointed.

"The little muckety-mucks don't get offices. Is that the film?"

"Uh-huh. I found it when I was sorting through some of my mother's things. I'm selling the house. I figured out what it was five minutes after I started watching it on the old family projector. He must have left it with her for safekeeping."

"He didn't give it to her?"

"He might have. I couldn't find anything about it in Mom's old letters. He never wrote to either of us. Anyway, it's the same thing. She wound up with it."

"Maybe not the same. Ring died intestate. The Internal Revenue Service seized his assets for back taxes as soon as he was declared legally dead. Unless it can be proven that he no longer owned the film at the time his boat sank, the government might have a prior claim."

Kirdy scratched his sunburned chin. "I guess it would be different if he were alive."

"Death complicates things."

"Some things. Others it simplifies. I suppose a thing like this needs special care."

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"Quite a bit. That old silver-nitrate stock has a tendency to self-destruct."

Kirdy placed the package on Valentino's desk. "Why don't you put it in a safe place until the lawyers finish hassling it out? If there's anything left you can make me an offer."

"I'll give you a receipt." Valentino opened a drawer. He hoped Justin Ring's nephew didn't notice how badly his hand was shaking.

"Not necessary." Kirdy opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

"Wait! You haven't told me where I can get in touch with you."

"I know where you are." He looked back. "Are you going to watch the film?"

"I screen everything that comes through this office."

"It'll hook you. It hooked me, and I don't like movies much. Do you know what it's about?"

"No."

"It's the story of an artist who fakes his own death."

For a long time after Kirdy left, Valentino stood staring at the bundle on his desk. He wondered if he'd been made the victim of a con. Two or three times a year someone tried to sell him information on the whereabouts of von Stroheim's *Greed* or the scrapped footage from *All Quiet on the Western Front,* and he'd developed a sixth sense for phony tips that spoiled his appetite. So he skipped lunch and took the package to the screening room.

The film, which ran just under forty minutes, suffered from most of the problems associated with an amateur effort, but showed definite signs of a genius in the making. Some of the angles and dolly shots were far ahead of their time, and the uneven pacing foreshadowed the notorious Ring assonance. The story, about a Gaugin-type impressionist painter who stages his false suicide by appearing to leap into an active volcano and thus creates a demand for his work, was compelling; given Justin Ring's own supposed death four decades later, Valentino found himself paying more attention to the plot than to the directorial technique. If, however, the film was a forgery, the telltale traces of oxidation were nearly impossible to manufacture without the assistance of time. He concluded the film was genuine.

The blank screen filled with possibilities. Justin Ring's age and difficult reputation had deprived him of his livelihood. A string of bad marriages, a succession of disastrous cinematic ventures, and tax woes had backed him into a corner he had sought to escape from temporarily by sailing around the world. Then, like the *deus ex machina* endings he delighted in working into his films, a sudden storm and the Great Barrier Reef had conspired to free him from all his worldly obligations. If, like his fictional painter, he had rigged his disappearance, his stubborn refusal to allow his student project—his blueprint—out of his hands was explained. It was conceivable that he had destroyed every print in

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his possession while forgetting all about the one he had placed in his sister's safekeeping sometime back.

Valentino rewound the reels and returned them to their cans. These were automatic actions and unshackled his mind to think.

Justin Ring's first film had to be preserved. It was in the best interest of posterity that the work be done by the experts at UCLA. As long as Ring was legally dead, the only way to proceed without fear of repercussions was to notify the Internal Revenue Service, which would likely attach both reels and store them in some uninsulated barn of a government warehouse where they would deteriorate from humidity and neglect.

Tough decision.

Yeah, right.

Back in his office, he placed the reels in the vault and spent an hour pawing through old filmscripts, yellowed memos, and forgotten actors' faces pickled in ancient publicity stills until he found the composition book containing his notes for the time he had visited Ring's house. Twenty minutes more to decipher his fugitive personal shorthand, then he flipped on his intercom.

"Ruth, I need you to find a telephone listing for a fellow named Ki. He was Justin Ring's houseman eight years ago."

"Ki, Kay Eye?" Ruth's vocal cords had been destroyed by cigarettes when Sam Goldwyn was a pup.

"I think so."

"First name or last?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, what city?"

"I don't know."

"What *do* you know?"

"He's Asian. Chinese or Korean, I think. He was old when I met him. I'm not even sure if he's still alive."

"And they call *you* the detective." She clicked off.

With nothing more to be done, he clamped *Sherlock Holmes* back onto the Movieola and resumed his viewing; but his attention wandered and he found himself wondering what Holmes would have done with the Justin Ring thing.

Ruth buzzed him five minutes before quitting time.

"Fortunately," she said, "there's only one domestic placement service the cream of Hollywood trusts with its precious tchotchkes. *Un*fortunately, they destroy their employment records after five years. Fortunately, a Korean-American named Ki Wan, seventy-four, worked opening doors and bottles of Perrier for Barbra Streisand year before last."

"Which house?"

"The Art Deco. What sort of bonus do I get for all this gumshoe labor?"

"A brand new pair of Nikes."

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"Keep 'em. I've worn heels for fifty years. Can't walk in anything else." She gave him Ki Wan's telephone number.

The house was a small stucco box with a faded red tile roof, identical to its neighbors in Tarzana's original housing tract. Valentino found the old Korean, who lived alone, the precise opposite of the inscrutable Oriental of story and film: His guttered face became animated when he spoke of his grandchildren, whose pictures crowded the mantel above the false fireplace in the tiny parlor, and he was not satisfied until his guest agreed to drink something, even the humble glass of ice water he eventually brought. Apart from a pronounced rounding of his back and shoulders, Ki appeared not to have aged in eight years.

The veil dropped into place when Valentino mentioned Mr. Cortez.

"Know no such name." Seated in the wicker chair opposite his guest with his gnarled hands on his knees, he resembled an ivory idol in a Fu Manchu film.

"It might take some remembering," Valentino said. "You brought Mr. Ring a telephone near the end of my visit. He was quick to take it when you said the caller was Mr. Cortez."

"Know no such name."

Ki's expression was as final as a closing credit. Valentino sighed and stood. He held out one of his cards. "Please call me if anything comes back. The university will pay for reliable information."

Ki started to take the card. His eyes went to the line reading "Film Detective." His hand recoiled as if from a snake.

"No take." He clamped his knees.

Valentino started to put the card on the low tea table between the chairs.

"No. Leave. Go, please."

The old man's face, "scrutable" once more, was distorted with fear. Valentino returned the card to his wallet, thanked him for his hospitality, and left.

He used the cellular telephone in his car to make an appointment with Sergeant Zuma at Los Angeles City Hall.

Pete Zuma was a handsome Chicano, sleek-haired and careful in his dress, who had turned down a role in a feature motion picture to continue his career with the L.A.P.D. The role had gone to Al Pacino and Puma was content to limit his show business involvement to an occasional consultancy. Valentino had met him at Zoetrope, showing Harvey Keitel how to operate a Belgian semiautomatic pistol. They had several interests in common, including the love of movies, but this was the first time the film detective had ever consulted the police detective on a matter involving Zuma's specialty.

"So he mistook you for a real detective and it frightened him." The sergeant, wearing a custom shirt and seventy-five-dollar tie, leaned back in his desk chair with his hands behind his head. "After you called

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I punched up Ki's name on the computer. He's clean, so it's not the police he's afraid of."

Valentino admired a framed photograph of a three-year-old Pedro Zuma sitting on the lap of a long-forgotten Mexican movie star in a tight gaucho costume. He'd been star-struck almost as long as Valentino. "What did you get on Cortez?"

"See for yourself." Zuma tore a long sheet off the printer on his credenza and gave it to him.

The sheer length of the arrest record made Valentino whistle. "How long has he been in San Quentin?"

"Never did a day. See that 'N/C' at the end of every entry? Means 'no conviction.' The cops in three countries have been trying to nail Refugio Cortez for fifteen years. He was a small-time Colombian druglord until he managed to elect a president there. The president was assassinated three years later, but by then he'd gone international."

"What would a Colombian druglord be doing calling Justin Ring?"

"He was too big even then to be acting as a Hollywood connection. Maybe he's a fan."

"The way Ring jumped to take the call, you'd have thought he was the head of Paramount. Also Ring wouldn't speak until I was out of earshot."

"You said Ring's boat went down near Australia?"

He nodded. "It's a long way from Colombia."

"Maybe so, but Cortez owns a shipping company there. He also has legitimate investments in New Zealand and the Solomons. A real Horatio Alger story, as told by Al Capone."

"How did Cortez manage to elect a Colombian president?"

"The details vary. One story is he financed a propoganda film that made the candidate look like a combination of George Washington and Mother Theresa, but that's fishy. Pompon-waving in that part of the world is a clumsy affair. It wouldn't take in an ignorant peasant."

"Who was in charge of making the film?"

"I can't bring that up on my terminal. The department's computer barely has room to store criminal records. It's no crime to make a movie, although it ought to be in certain cases."

The film detective thanked him for his help, made a date for lunch later in the week, and left.

Shortly after midnight, a frantic knocking at the front door of Valentino's house woke him from a deep sleep of exhaustion and frustration. He threw on a shirt and trousers and went down in slippers. A young Hispanic in a sweatshirt, with his hair disheveled, stood on the other side of the peephole looking worried. Valentino opened the door on a flood of Spanish. The homeowner, who knew a little Spanish, told him to slow down.

On the second round he caught *accidente* and *esposa*. Haltingly, he asked the man if his wife was injured.

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"Sí, daño." The young man's eyes swam with tears.

Valentino told him to remain calm and turned back inside to call an ambulance. Something hard prodded his right kidney.

"Is a gun, *hermano,"* the man hissed in his ear. "Come with me or I blow out your spine."

He was hustled into a white stretch limo at the end of the driveway. The man sat next to him with his revolver resting in the crook of his arm, pointed at Valentino. The back of the driver's head was a mile away. They rode without conversation to the top of Mulholland, where a helicopter waited with its blades feathering. Valentino was prodded out of the car and into the seat behind the pilot. Next to the pilot sat a white-haired man wearing a headset. The man was monstrously fat—fatter even than Justin Ring— and had on sunglasses, which the film detective thought pretentious so long past dark. The fat man smiled across the back of his seat, tapping his headset. Valentino found another just like it on the seat beside him and put it on. By then they were airborne, swinging in a broad arc over the panoply of light that was Los Angeles after sunset.

"Valentino." The voice in his earphones was lightly accented. "Spanish or Italian?"

"Italian, on my father's side." Valentino spoke into his mouthpiece. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say yours is Cortez."

"An unsecured loan from the great conquistador, I'm afraid. I have family back home that needs protecting. I apologize for our deception. I couldn't be sure you would agree to a meeting."

"Your man's a talented actor." He thought he could see the lights of the limousine carrying the young man back down toward the valley.

"I'll tell him you said so. So far the only work he's been able to get is as an extra. Why are you asking all over town about Justin Ring?"

"I've only asked in two places."

"That isn't an answer. Julio."

The pilot leaned over and opened the door. The air rushed in at Valentino. The helicopter went into a steep bank and he had to clutch his seat to keep from sliding out. There were no safety straps of any kind in the backseat. The helicopter banked the other way and the pilot yanked the door shut. Valentino's heart bounded between his earphones.

"Julio trained in the Persian Gulf," Cortez said. "He can perform maneuvers with a helicopter that the aerodynamists insist are impossible. Your body will be found lying six inches deep in the pavement on Santa Monica Boulevard. If you wish to avoid becoming one of Hollywood's enduring mysteries, you need only tell me what your interest is in Justin Ring."

"I want to acquire his student film for the UCLA archives."

"Julio."

The door popped open and the helicopter banked again, more steeply.

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Valentino sank his nails into the seat's slick vinyl surface. The bank went on forever. He started to slide.

"The truth, Mr. Valentino."

"It *is* the truth! I swear it!" The wind skirled up inside the legs of his trousers.

"All right, Julio."

The correcting bank slammed the door shut without the pilot's help.

"Justin Ring is dead," said Cortez.

"His nephew suspects otherwise."

"Why?"

When Valentino hesitated, Cortez sighed and looked at Julio.

"No! Please don't. Ring's student film is about a man who rigs his own death and then goes into hiding. It made us both suspicious. For my part, a live Ring would be easier to negotiate with than a tangled estate."

"What is the nephew's name?"

"He doesn't know anything."

"I'm a busy man, Mr. Valentino. I don't have time to show everyone in Southern California the view from my airship. I merely want his name so I can verify what you're saying. Once more, Julio."

"Elmo Kirdy."

The fat man swung his head around fast enough to dislodge his earphones. Then he began to laugh deeply and heartily, as only a man can who was born to a Latin culture. When at last he ran out of laughter: "Please forgive me, Mr. Valentino. As you Americans used to say in your wartime films, this trip was not necessary. Take us back, Julio."

When they were on the ground with the rotors slowing, Cortez removed his headset. "Don't be embarrassed by your fear, my friend. Ki Wan is old and difficult to frighten, but he was swift to call me after you spoke with him this evening."

Valentino, recovering, laid down his own set. "I'm a Hollywood brat, Mr. Cortez. That means I'm a lot more easy to scare than I am to embarrass. May I give you one more piece of information you may already possess? Your expression will tell me if I'm right."

The druglord raised a conciliatory hand.

Valentino spoke briefly. After a moment, Cortez grinned broad and bright. The film detective nodded and opened the door. "By the way," he said, "your Sidney Greenstreet needs work."

He walked all the way back to his house, slept peacefully until the alarm woke him, and went to the office. Elmo Kirdy called just before noon. Valentino told him he was prepared to make him an offer for Justin Ring's student film. Kirdy agreed to a meeting in Valentino's office in one hour.

He arrived on time, wearing brown corduroys with the ribs worn smooth at the knees and a blue sweatshirt reading HANG TEN FOR JESUS. His beautifully styled silver hair was in place and his face was

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flushed slightly, as if he'd spent all morning at the beach. Valentino stared.

"If there's anything this town has more of than vain movie stars, it's good plastic surgeons," he said. "Yours could run for mayor."

"Hey, man, this is all me. I take care of myself, you know?"

"You can drop the Brian Wilson act, Ring. Your cover's blown."

Kirdy hesitated. Then he grinned, his capped teeth blue-white against his caramel skin. "You *are* a detective," he said. "The surgeon was in Argentina. He couldn't leave because of some work he'd done on certain German emigrés after World War Two. I was his last case before he retired. He wanted to change me completely, but I insisted on maintaining a family resemblance. Maybe I should have tried to pass for a younger cousin instead."

"No, you look young enough to be your own nephew. Ring's sister died childless, by the way. I verified that this morning. Why'd you fake your own death?"

"It was the only way to get out from under. It doesn't matter anymore, now that I'm legally dead. The IRS can't touch me. When this reaches the media, I'll be a hot property: Justin Ring, back from the grave. Maybe I'll be able to swing the financing to continue my career where I left off. I look young enough to slide in under the invisible wire. Trim enough, too."

"Refugio Cortez hired you to shoot a film that would help put his pet candidate in the executive mansion in Colombia. You did such a good job he was happy to help you 'die.' He sent one of his ships to pluck you off your boat near Australia, blew it up, and got you the surgeon and a place to stay while you shed a hundred and fifty pounds so no one would know you."

"My conscience is clear. The rival candidate was backed by a different druglord."

"Cortez almost killed me when I started investigating your death. You should have clued him in."

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I just wanted to beat the studio system."

"I'm happy you shot Cortez's film under the pseudonym Elmo Kirdy. It saved my life." Valentino indicated the two film cans stacked on his desk. "What's your price?"

"A press conference announcing my donation of the film. And your presence at the world premiere of my next feature."

"What are you going to call it?"

Justin Ring smiled. *"Lazarus."*●

NOTE TO READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address so that we can contact them too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220.

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1998 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

1998 was a year of cosmetic changes for *EQMM*— we're in a new size, with enhanced illustration and sturdier paper — but though we've altered our appearance, the heart of the magazine, our lineup of fiction, continues to feature many of your longtime favorites, complemented, of course, by captivating new talent.

Many readers wrote to us to express opinions, good and bad, about our size change. Glad as we were to receive those letters, we have an even keener interest in hearing how you received the year's fiction. Fourteen years ago the editors of *EQMM* decided that it was time to let the magazine's readers serve as critics. Our writers were taking the lion's share of established awards in the genre, but most of these honors were determined by publishing professionals or other writers. It was time, *EQMM* felt, to give readers a voice. For the most part, the choices you've made over the years have corresponded with those of the professional judges for other mystery awards: several of *EQMM*'s Edgar Allan Poe Award nominees have also been on the Readers Award shortlist. But on several occasions you've surprised us, picking out sleepers, stories of superior quality that all but a perceptive eye would miss as belonging to the year's best.

Please join with us once more in recognizing the finest short stories of the year. Cast your ballot for the tales that stayed in your imagination long after you put the magazine down. In so doing, you'll be letting us know whose work you'd like to see more often—and we'll try to oblige!

The rules for 1998 are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two, if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner. All stories published in *EQMM* in 1998 are eligible for the award.

On the next page you will find your ballot. Please refresh your memory of the year's selections by referring to the index on pages 139-141 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address on the following page, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

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The 1998 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1999 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1998 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to:

The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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DO YOU TAKE THIS MAN?

by Barry Baldwin

All the world remembers that Ruth Ellis was the last woman to be executed in England, back in July, 1955. Well, they would, wouldn't they? She was blond, she was a nightclub hostess and we all know what that means, the man she shot was a classy racecar driver, and they made a film about her with Miranda Richardson, *Dance With a Stranger*, wasn't it called?

But ask anybody to name just one other woman who had an early morning date with Albert the hangman, and it's odds on they'll be stumped. Understandable enough. There weren't that many. Read Albert's memoirs, *Executioner*: Pierrepoint, if you want the details. When he dropped Louisa Merrifield in August, 1953, she was only the sixth member of the fair sex to go down the chute since Edith Thompson thirty years before. Just a few months before Ruthie E stepped onto the marked spot on the trapdoor, an elderly grey-haired Greek grandmother had had the white hood placed over her head in Holloway prison. Funny thing, there hadn't been a peep from the great British public over her, but then Mrs. Christofi wasn't a West End glamour girl, only some old foreign biddy from Cyprus.

There wasn't any fuss over Maud Longbottom, either, and nobody these days could tell you who she was. But she was a big story in her time. After all, it isn't very often that a middle-aged bride stabs her hubby to death on their wedding night, especially when she'd spent so long plotting to get him to the altar. . . .

Barry Baldwin was born and grew up in the Lincolnshire of this story. After acquiring a Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Nottingham (U.K.), he emigrated first to Australia and then, in 1965, to Canada, where he has been ever since. Until his retirement in 1997, Mr. Baldwin was a professor of classics. He has published twelve books on Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and 18th century history and literature, but this is his very first fiction.

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Sam Snaith caused quite a stir when he turned up one fine September morning in 1945. For a stranger to appear out of the blue was not improbable in itself at that time. Thanks to the Blitz and everything, there were over a million people wandering around the country homeless, and a lot of them didn't want to be stuck in army Nissen huts or with relatives they couldn't abide. Still, it wasn't every day or even every year that a newcomer was seen in Bigby Puellarum, a little stone village hardly more than a hamlet nestled in the Lincolnshire Wolds.

The locals didn't know what to make of Sam Snaith at all. It wasn't just the simple fact of his choosing to live among them when he had the rest of the British Isles at his disposal. There were other things about him that they ticked off on their fingers as they discussed him in the evenings over their pints of the Bateman's Good Honest Ale advertised on the red and gold sign above The Tainted Goose, the village's only pub. His accent, for one, definitely not Lincolnshire; there wasn't a trace of Alfred Lord Tennyson in his diphthongs or vowels. All agreed he must be a southerner, from London itself, so the more expert linguists in the pub's snug asserted, their diagnosis made all the more confident by the fact that none of them had ever been down there.

Sam Snaith was a well set-up kind of fellow, everyone admitted, not bad looking in a sharp-featured, pale, washed-out blue eyes sort of way, with a good head of dark hair plastered down with soap rather than Brylcreem, and what seemed to be his own teeth. What struck people most, though, was his height, a good six feet, made all the more impressive by the slow, stiff way he walked on the infrequent occasions they saw him out and about, something to do with the big brown-leather belt, at least six inches wide, without which he never appeared.

The biggest mystery, however, was how he lived and what he did. Or rather, didn't do. Sam Snaith had no job, that much was obvious. He wasn't part of the geriatric shuffle of a Friday morning at the village shop-cum-post office to draw a pension of any sort. The postman said it was only once in a blue moon that he delivered anything there, and when he did, it was just circulars, never a proper letter, not even a football-pools coupon from Littlewoods or Zetters. So, how did the man live? Most of all, how— the transaction was confirmed in the snug by George Taylor, whose son clerked for the house agent's in the market town five miles away, where the villagers went to do all their big business of life and death— had he been able to plunk down hard cash for Rose Cottage after the death of old Ella Pacey, who had lived in it for longer than anyone could remember?

Sam Snaith was polite enough when you did bump into him, but he never went much beyond the weather and the food shortages, and gave not the slightest impression of wanting to share information, let alone deep dark confidences, about anything, above all not why every three months or so he went off on the train, always back the next day seemingly pleased with himself.

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Still, you couldn't function like a Trappist monk all the time in a little village like that. What Sam Snaith did let drop was gradually fashioned into an official life story by the biographers of The Tainted Goose. He had apparently volunteered for the First War, but stayed at the rank of private, of which hierarchical immobility he seemed gruffly proud, and was invalided out after taking a piece of shell in Bazentin churchyard at the battle of the Somme in July, 1916.

"Through his right thigh up near his you know what, they say," one of the snuggites insisted, drawing upon the mysterious third parties always invoked to endorse such precise detail.

"Funny, I heard it were the left one."

"Right, left, what the thump does it matter? I had a mate in that lot. They had to charge with a butcher's knife taffled up to the end of a broomstick with medical plaster, instead of a proper rifle and bayonet. At least Snaith lived to tell the tale. My mate copped it in the very last advance."

Pint mugs were hoisted in ritual memory of the men who had gone down in these carnages, along with comments on the quality of the military planning that led to it, unhindered by their own farm labourers' exemption from its results.

By putting him out of any future action, that bit of German shrapnel may well have saved Sam Snaith's life, but it left him with a hole in his side and most of his stomach muscles destroyed, hence the constant support of the big brown belt, which some thought "more fancy than it needed" even after hearing the reason for it. After the War, there were few jobs in the "land fit for heroes" for able-bodied men, let alone damaged ones, and Sam Snaith was not interested in whatever pension or compensation he might have been entitled to. "You don't expect to get paid for fighting for your country," he snapped at Mrs. Foster, who ran the village shop, when she'd wondered if he needed an application form to have his government money transferred from wherever he'd been getting it before. According to George Taylor, via his son, who'd heard it from his secretary, he'd knocked around the world, working here, there, and everywhere as best his wound allowed, accumulating, in the process, quite a nice little nest egg. In 1940, when the Second War had got properly going, he came back to do his bit on the home front. Again, he had a piece of negative good luck, since if he hadn't been out in the middle of the night on Air Raid Warden duty, he would have perished along with his cousin in the rubble of her back-to-back house in Poplar when a Jerry bomb scored yet another direct hit on the East End of London.

"Caps owt he should turn up here, after all that."

"No, it don't," said Gabriel Nelson, pleased to be in the limelight for once: Postmen tend to be the bearers of other people's news rather than their own. "I knocked on his door once, a few weeks after he moved in. I felt sorry for the poor bugger, never getting any letters. I wished I hadn't when he gave me a right loppard look and said that suited him very well. But then he unbuckled a bit and said all he wanted was peace and quiet the rest of his days. He'd read somewhere that Lin-

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colnshire was in the back of beyond and still old-fashioned, and that was right up his street."

"That's as mebbe. But why this village? What's so special about Bigby Puellarum?"

"Shut your tatie-trap and I'll tell you. It was the queer name that made him pick it. Said he'd looked it up in White's *Lincolnshire* and found out 'Puellarum' was Latin for 'of the girls.' He didn't reckon there'd be much call for Latin nowadays in this part of the world, so he wasn't worried about any language problems."

The snug by now had had its ration of Sam Snaith for that night, so turned its attention to other topics, of which the local neglect of Latin was not one.

As it turned out, "of the girls" was a bit ironic. Sam Snaith had never married. It was understood that because of his war wound, he couldn't "oblige" as a husband should, and he didn't want to be a burden on any woman. This raised a hollow laugh from the men of the village. Sam Snaith seemed to them to be living the life of Riley, sitting around while the women fought over who should cook and clean for him.

Sour grapes; but it was true. The ladies were beating a competitive path to the door of Rose Cottage. Sam Snaith was a double novelty: He was the village's only new resident and only old war hero. Add that he lived alone, had no relatives, couldn't do much for himself, and seemed comfortably off, and there were reasons good and bad why he should be adopted as the ideal target for the charitable and other impulses of the good women of Bigby Puellarum.

The rector's wife was, naturally, first off the mark. Nowadays, she would be in a novel suffering from marital angst and trying to find herself, a voyage of self-discovery usually achieved by finding herself in another man's bed. There was no danger of Sam Snaith's good Samaritan waking up in his small front bedroom, though. Her forays to Rose Cottage, always unannounced, were strictly in pursuit of her Christian duty, made manifest through home-baked pies and bottled fruits and bustling around him as he sat in his armchair, chirping "All Things Bright and Beautiful" and Dear Samming him all the time, though he'd never said she might call him that and she'd have been aghast if he'd Dear Elizabethed her.

The rector himself never came back after the fiasco of his official welcome-to-the-village call, when a litany of available Sunday services was cut short by Sam Snaith saying, "Tell me, Vicar, where was God on the Somme? And seeing as how Jerry worshipped Him as well, which side would He have been on?" The Bible had no answer to that, hence neither did the rector, who said that was a very interesting point which they'd have to follow up another time, but now (dragging out his pocket watch) there was Mrs. Hutchings with her bad legs waiting for him and after that the parish-magazine delivery roster to see to, no rest for the wicked, he quipped, as he hastily let himself out with a tuneless

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whistling of the opening bars of his favourite hymn, "The Daily Round, the Common Task."

As soon as she heard that the rector's wife had paid her state visit to Rose Cottage, Mrs. Naylor from the Methodist Chapel at the other end of the village was round there with her offerings, kicking herself for letting the Anglicans get in first, but still determined to show that Chapel charity was twice as bountiful. When Sam Snaith faced her with his question about God and the Somme, she just replied, not bothering to include the fact that Mr. Naylor himself had been blown to smithereens there, that it wasn't up to her to say, an answer that he seemed quite to like. The same did not apply to little George Whitefield, who came calling on behalf of the tiny band of dissident Wesleyan Reformers in the village, it being his bounden duty to warn the newcomer against the heretical teachings of both the Anglicans and Mrs. Naylor and her crowd. Sam Snaith, however, was not best pleased to answer the knock on his door and find a man rather than a woman standing there, still less so to observe that this person was holding no baked goods in his hands, but only a tract in one and a pair of black bicycle clips in the other, so neither on this nor on several subsequent attempts did little George Whitefield ever get across the threshold of Rose Cottage.

In their efforts to "do the right thing by him," and win him over to their cause into the bargain, the rector's wife and Mrs. Naylor soon had their respective bands of ladies organised into an efficient rota system, and Sam Snaith found himself sitting very pretty, hardly able though very willing to cope with the flow of God's good gifts to his table, everything from Anglican apricot flan to Methodist mutton pies. A number of the good Samaritans, though, were at least as interested in the newcomer's heart as his soul, in spite of the big brown belt and the woe it was said to conceal, and accordingly, in that expression so vehemently disliked by Jane Austen, who could have made a pretty tale out of these goings-on in Bigby Puellarum, they were minded to set their caps at him. Seasoned veteran that he was, Sam Snaith had no trouble convincing each and every one of them that they were special to him, without saying or doing anything particular to demonstrate this, but so adroitly that even while acknowledging that their quarry was one who took much and gave little, they believed him and kept coming back with more for less. That is, until Maud Longbottom entered the lists.

It was not Maud Longbottom's way to rush into things. That was one, though not the only reason she was The Village Spinster in popular designation, as opposed to the heart-fluttering good Samaritans who, if not enjoying the status of widow, were more lightly regarded as ladies who happened not to be married. She was alert to Sam Snaith from the day he arrived, and promoted him above Fred James, the butcher, to the top of her batting order as soon as she heard about his purchase of Rose Cottage. Maud had lived in Bigby Puellarum all her life and could predict every move and nuance of the theological and secular cossetings of Sam Snaith that would ensue. Fools rush in with angels close

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behind, she reflected, as she did about most things. So, she sat back while the rival factions jostled for position, sifting through the colander of her mind the bits and bobs of information about Sam Snaith as they came in. Eventually, Maud composed a written digest of where matters stood on a sheet of her best Basildon Bond stationery, pondered a while, and decided that his and her time had come.

Maud's ambition was, as it had always been, to find a man to wed who was well provided for, who would put a roof over her head and food in her belly, and above all who would not bother her with the you-know-what side of marriage. She knew this last quality was a lot harder to come by in a man than money, but from what was said about the nature of his war wound, he couldn't be doing that sort of thing even if he wanted to. There was something to be said for wars, thought Maud: They not only rid you of unwanted male family—a father in the First, two brothers in the Second—but also presented you with an impotent patriot there for the taking.

Talking about war, that was one thing Sam Snaith hardly ever did, his God and the Somme riddle apart, another point in his favour. He didn't join the British Legion, never marched on Remembrance Day, had no stock of repetitive stories about the trenches. "What's the point of bringing all that up again?" was his answer to Mrs. Naylor when she tackled him about this, the only one who dared, prompted not so much by courage as by the feeling that in not remembering the dead, Sam Snaith was slighting the sacrifice of her own man. Maud, however, did once catch him standing in front of the village's war memorial with its bird dropping-decorated statue of an infantryman in puttees resting on his rifle and its tiny sprinkling of dead heroes' names—everyone had been a hero in combat, it seemed, which didn't square with Maud's experience of ordinary life—with a funny, brooding look on his face. But he didn't notice her notice him, and she kept her own counsel.

Little by little, Maud inched her way into Sam Snaith's life, then his good books, until she had a volume all to herself in these. She wasn't a raving beauty, of course, or anything approaching it, but she wasn't a plain-Jane either, being in some ways a feminine version of Sam Snaith himself, including his tallness, and there were settings in which she could look attractive, indeed almost heart-stopping—most women can. Maud spaced out these moments carefully, choreographing them to coincide with the times she considered he was getting too carried away by one or another of the village ladies, to arrest his drift and bring him back to a due appreciation of herself. Even though there was destined to be no physicality in the hoped-for marriage, Maud knew that any normal man preferred beauty to the beast, and Sam Snaith was abnormal only by circumstance.

Maud had a genius for undermining the good works of her rivals, always praising them but tainting the eulogy with a lethal qualification. Thus, she agreed that the rector's wife was a decent sort, in her way, but then, it came with her position, didn't it, it was part and par-

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cel of her job to be a decent sort. Yes, Mrs. Naylor certainly knew how to bake a Victoria sponge, wasn't it curious how anything so good could come out of that dirty hovel of a place she lived in, you should hear what the postman has to say about the smell. And it was kind of Elsie Bradshaw to send her lad round with a plate of fresh pig's fry, a traditional Lincolnshire village expression of neighbourliness, though hadn't he heard the story of how last year when on this annual errand the boy had been caught—here, Maud contrived to colour a little—"abusing himself" into one of the frys to get even with the intended recipient, who hadn't given him the equally traditional sixpence reward the year before that? Maud hugged her satisfaction to herself as she observed a degree of pallor on Sam Snaith's face at this last revelation; it was the first time she'd seen him leave anything unfinished.

Maud herself was no great hand at cooking. She did bring round an occasional treat to keep up with her competitors; Sam Snaith never guessed that he was eating the wares of the village shop or the Home and Colonial in the market town. Where she most successfully ingratiated herself was by undertaking jobs that no one else would. You'd never catch the Dear Samming rector's wife volunteering to empty the bucket each week from Rose Cottage's earth lavatory at the bottom of the garden, which Maud also offered to rescue from the jungle old Ella Pacey had left and keep in good order throughout the seasons. "That old beezum certainly left it all anshum-scranshum," she observed. Away from Sam Snaith, it wasn't her habit to use such unrelentingly Lincolnshire idioms, but she calculated that by seasoning her conversations with them and then explaining them to him, she was at one and the same time making him feel more fitted into the community and laying him under yet greater obligation.

All these services acted like a reverse drip-drip Chinese water torture. Worn down without realising it, since she never crossed him in any way or interfered with what he did and didn't do—the train trips and overnight absences continued; she was not invited to go with him, and did not ask to, or why—Sam Snaith came to assume that she would always be there when he wanted her to be, an effective physical and mental dependency.

Ultimately, Maud established her monopoly. The rector's wife trailed off and stopped coming, apart from the obligatory Christmas call. She had a new cause now, in any case. A child in the village had gone down with polio, or infantile paralysis as it was then called, and she was running around organising the collections of silver paper that mysteriously helped to acquire an iron lung for the unfortunate little victim. It was hard to say who was better pleased at her quitting the field, Sam Snaith or the rector. With her gone, the theological imperatives for the Methodists ceased, so Mrs. Naylor came no more with her Victoria sponges, nor little Mr. Whitefield with his tracts and bicycle clips. The few independent rivals who had been hanging on more and more grimly in competition with Maud now gave up and left the way clear for "that woman."

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So, one evening in the "back end" or late autumn, with the fire nicely crackling in the grate thanks to the logs she had sawed and fetched in, and with "Meet the Huggetts" burbling just audibly on the old brown Bakelite wireless, Sam Snaith looked across at Maud, as she plied her needles over another new brown cardigan for him, in a way he had never done before and said, "You know, I dare say Rose Cottage is big enough for two."

Maud glanced around before looking back at him. "Yes, I dare say it is."

That was that. What passed between them unsaid spoke volumes. Sam Snaith and Maud Longbottom were married a month later, at the Register Office in the market town. Neither had, or admitted to having, any relatives, and Maud's single-minded drive towards matrimony had never been cluttered up with yearning for the fuss and palaver of a church "do," much to the relief of the rector. The requisite number of witnesses were roped in off the street, and the couple smoothly signed into wedlock in the 3:45 P.M. slot.

After a solid meal, for which Maud footed the bill against very little opposition, they caught the last bus back to the village and were soon in the kitchen, where Maud set to work boiling up milk for what had been her, but was now their, goodnight cocoa. She didn't consult Sam Snaith over this. It was the first independent decision she had overtly made for them both; she might as well start as she meant to go on.

As she stirred the milk to stop it from catching on the bottom of the saucepan and burning, Maud allowed herself to wonder about the looming prospect of being in the same bed as the man who would now be in all ways but one her husband. Even without any funny business, it would still be funny. She hoped he wasn't the snoring type. At any rate, he would make a decent hot-water bottle, to top off all the other matrimonial facilities she had coveted for so long and now had.

It occurred to Maud that perhaps she should say something to him about how she really wasn't bothered about the impending lack of funny business. So, she turned down the gas flame under the saucepan as low as it would go, and said without looking at him, "I know tonight won't be the way it is in magazines, but . . ."

"But," she heard him say in a tone of voice he'd never come out with before, "if you turn round and have a look, you might get more than you bargained for."

Maud turned round and had her look. But when she saw what she saw, it was Sam Snaith who got more than he bargained for.

At her trial, Maud pleaded guilty, otherwise she kept her mouth clamped throughout. Her crown-appointed lawyer chose not to call her to testify, so all he could do was to try and whip up some "crime of passion" sympathy among the jurors. But her silence didn't give him much to go on, and anyway eleven of the twelve were men so that didn't cut any ice, and in his summing-up the judge, who was well known for his fondness for putting on the black cap, made a meal out of reminding them that this was England, not France, and they must also consider

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that in a genuine crime of passion it was usual for the victim to be butchered in a frenzy, while the postmortem had established that Sam Snaith had fallen to a single, carefully planted, obviously well-meditated stab of the carving knife.

Which was indeed the case. But although no one bar Maud ever knew the full ins and outs of it, this had been a unique postmortem: It was established not only how the victim had died, but why. Because, when the pathologist had Sam Snaith up on the slab, he confirmed what a quick once-over in the kitchen at Rose Cottage had already told him, though it might have told him more had not Maud, with due regard for the proprieties, rearranged her husband's clothing, namely that the big brown belt was hiding nothing beyond the paunch that his recent life of ease and eating had given him. There was no wound, never had been, it had all been dreamed up to deceive the good ladies of Bigby Puellarum into becoming his unpaid servants, his way to the life of inexpensive indolence he had always hankered after. There was nothing wrong with his stomach muscles, and Sam Snaith was perfectly capable of "obliging" a woman, wife or otherwise, and he hadn't been wasting his time or money on those train trips of his down to London to spend the night with a rented bedmate, never using the same one, never using the same name.

The army and the police both went into the records as best they could after so many years. But they couldn't find any trace of a Sam Snaith who had served at the Somme or anywhere else in World War One, and there was no sign of him ever having held a passport. The source of his money never came to light, either—this was life, not some story in which all the loose ends are tied up in the last paragraph—though the cousin in Poplar was considered a possibility, always assuming she had ever existed, as was a series of holdups and robberies not long before the Second War—one witness's description did sound a bit like him.

Sam Snaith was buried in the village churchyard, and in the spirit of competitive Christian charity, a new rivalry arose between the rector's wife (her iron-lung campaign being now concluded), Mrs. Naylor, and the other ladies of Bigby Puellarum over keeping his grave neatly trimmed and freshly decorated with flowers. Maud, after her appointment with Albert P., was dug into the grounds of Holloway prison, with a plain marker giving her initials and the dates of when she had come into this world and gone out of it.

Thanks to her, death had them well and truly parted, though you could argue that it was at least as much his doing as hers. This was not something the ladies of the village discussed very much. They still had their soft spot for Sam Snaith, whatever he might have done or not done, and they hadn't liked Maud Longbottom even before she put their noses out of joint by taking him from them. Now, they had him back forever, and they were rid of her, so by and large God, wherever He might have been at the Somme, had worked everything out in a way that, despite other theological differences, they all found very satisfactory.●

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The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge

by Edward D. Hoch

It seems appropriate that the last issue of Edward D. Hoch's twenty-fifth anniversary year with *EQMM* should contain a story that refers back to an early case of one of his most popular detectives. In "The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge" series character Dr. Sam Hawthorne is invited to take part in ceremonies commemorating one of his very first cases, from 1974. Hats off to Hawthorne and his creator for another splendid puzzle. †

A visit from Sheriff Lens on a snowy Sunday morning was more than unusual (Dr. Sam Hawthorne was telling his guest over brandy). It was downright strange. When I saw him at my door at ten o'clock on that January morning in 1940 I thought there'd been some startling overnight development in the European War or else a brutal slaying right here in Northmont.

"Can I come in, Doc?" he asked. "I want to talk to you about something important."

"Of course." I opened the door, not knowing what grim message he might be bearing. "I hope it's not bad news."

His face relaxed into a grin. "No, no, nothing like that. I didn't mean to scare you." Never a small man, Sheriff Lens had been putting on weight lately. He moved a bit slower these days because of age and weight, but he was still my oldest and closest friend in town.

He joined me at the kitchen table and I poured him a cup of coffee. "What can I do for you?"

"Not keeping you from church, am I?"

I shrugged. "We've got Dr. Brewster from Shinn Corners filling in this week. It's no great loss if I miss his sermon."

"We had a meeting last night about the Northmont centennial. It's this year. The town was founded in eighteen forty, you know."

"Time flies," I told him with a smile. "I guess I was never too big on centennials or birthdays."

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"Doc." He was serious now. "We want you to take part in the celebration in a special way. Vera and I worked it out." Vera was his wife of ten years, a wonderful woman who'd made him delighted that he'd waited till past fifty to remarry after the death of his first wife.

"I'm not much at speeches, Sheriff. You know that."

"Who said anything about a speech? We're going to dramatize the four most memorable events in Northmont history, one for each season. Vera wanted to do one each month, but no one could think of twelve events that memorable." He gave a little chuckle. "I guess Northmont's not New York, or even Boston."

I still couldn't get what he was driving at. "What does all this have to do with me?"

"Well, Doc, I know it would make more sense to dramatize these events in the order they happened, but we have to tie them in with the seasons, you see. For winter we want to memorialize the first mystery you ever solved in Northmont."

"What?" I wasn't sure I'd heard him right.

"You know, the horse and buggy that vanished going through the covered bridge."

"That's crazy, Sheriff. Surely something more important than that must have happened here during the winter."

"It was a big event, Doc. People hereabouts really took notice of you."

"That was eighteen years ago!" I argued.

"Sure! The other three events are lots older than that."

I poured myself another cup of morning coffee. "Just tell me what you have in mind before I decide."

"We want to have a horse and buggy like the one Hank Bringlow was driving the day he disappeared. Vera was thinking maybe one of his relatives could fill in for him, but they've all moved away. So Mayor Sumerset said he'd ride in it."

"For what purpose, Sheriff? Do you think he'll disappear like Hank did?"

"There won't be any disappearance this time because folks'll be on both sides of the bridge. But we gotta do it this month or next, Doc, while there's snow on the ground. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes." The disappearance and murder of Hank Bringlow eighteen years earlier had been accomplished by some clever trickery involving tracks in the snow. Obviously the event could never be commemorated without snow on the ground. "But I just don't like the idea. I'm no hero, to be honored for something I just stumbled upon. . . . Sometimes I think those first months here were more a curse than a blessing. People started thinking of me as the doctor detective rather than the doctor."

"Would it help any if Vera talked to you?" Sheriff Lens asked.

I gave him my Sunday sigh, usually reserved for patients who telephoned me with inane questions on my supposed day of rest. "I really don't want to get involved with this, Sheriff."

He finished his coffee and stood up. "I'll have Vera speak with you."

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I'd expected that Vera Lens would phone me or stop by the office in a day or two. Instead, she was at my door two hours later, just at noon, brushing wet snowflakes from her coat. "Hello, Sam," she greeted me. "I hate to bother you on a Sunday like this, but our time is running out."

"Come in out of the snow, Vera." The sheriff's wife was a spunky, solid woman of around fifty who'd served as our postmistress for as long as I'd been in Northmont. The first Mrs. Lens had died during the influenza outbreak after the war and the sheriff had waited until December of '29 to marry again. "I haven't seen you since your tenth-anniversary party before Christmas."

She took my hand and smiled broadly. "You know, my husband was of two minds about inviting you. He was afraid there might be a murder if you were there."

I laughed. "Happily, it was a festive occasion with not a crime in sight."

I helped her off with her coat and she draped it over a chair. "I know my husband spoke with you about the centennial celebration, and I can understand your reluctance to take part in it. But I promise you won't be embarrassed, and I can guarantee Mayor Sumerset won't present you with a key to the city or anything like that. We just want you present when the mayor rides through the covered bridge like Hank Bringlow did back in nineteen twenty-two."

"And disappears."

She laughed at my reluctance. "That sort of thing only happens once in a lifetime. Come on! If you won't do it for Northmont, do it for me."

"Exactly what would be expected of me?"

"You simply stand there at the other end of the bridge with the sheriff and me. Shake hands with the mayor and that's it! Everyone will be there and we'll have an afternoon of ice skating and sledding for the kids."

"It sounds harmless enough," I admitted.

"Then you'll do it?"

It wasn't the first or last time in my life I was won over by a woman's wiles. "Sure. For you, Vera, I'll do it."

The first event of Northmont's centennial year was scheduled for the last Sunday in January. I was awakened by the sun sneaking through my bedroom curtains and glanced at the outdoor thermometer by the window. It was just over freezing at thirty-four degrees, not yet warm enough to make a significant dent in January's snowfall, but a perfect day for outdoor activities.

I phoned my nurse, Mary Best, as soon as I'd finished breakfast. "Hi, Mary. Ready for the big centennial celebration?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"The sheriff and Vera want me there by two o'clock. Should I pick you up around one-thirty?"

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"I'll be ready."

Since I'd passed my fortieth birthday a few years back, I'd been viewed by friends and patients as a confirmed bachelor. There were both advantages and disadvantages to the label. One advantage was that I could escort Mary Best to social functions without anyone viewing it as a serious romance. One disadvantage was that she never viewed it as a serious romance either.

The Buick I drove that day would never erase memories of the Pierce-Arrow Runabout that was my first car, but Mary hadn't been my nurse in those early days and she thought the Buick was just great. "The sunshine should bring out a crowd," she said as I helped her into the car. "I brought sandwiches in case we get hungry."

"Good idea." Mary Best was a fine nurse and a good woman. She'd been with me for nearly five years and I never regretted hiring her. About ten years younger than me, she was a city girl who ended up in Northmont purely by chance. When I hired her she'd worn her dark blond hair in a stylish bob, but I'd been glad to see the end of that passing fad. She was much more attractive now.

"You must feel honored," she said as we drove along the road to the covered bridge where it had all happened. "You took part in one of the four most memorable events in Northmont's history."

"I can't help feeling I'm the butt of some elaborate joke. I guess they wanted something from recent times and I was the best they could do. Mayor Sumerset made the final decision, I understand. He spent months poring over old newspapers and journals kept by the town historians."

"Everyone wanted you, Sam. The sheriff and mayor and even Joe Sweeney."

"Sweeney! Clipper Sweeney!" He was the first barber I'd gone to in Northmont after I set up practice in '22. He hadn't done any barbering in years but folks still called him Clipper because of the shrewd and shady business deals he was noted for.

North Road had been paved since that fateful day eighteen years earlier, but the covered bridge was still there. During the depression years the government had sent a crew from the Civilian Conservation Corps to repair and strengthen it. Now there was talk of making it a town landmark, not because of that long-ago mystery but simply because covered bridges were becoming something of a rarity. I hoped they did something before the government decided to tear it down.

We rounded the next curve in the road and I said, "It looks like there's a crowd already." Several cars were parked off the road, allowing a clear path for the horse and buggy that stood waiting for Mayor Sumerset. They were owned by Doug Tanner, a local horseman who had a collection of old buggies in his barn. We drove through the bridge and I pulled up behind the buggy.

Will Sumerset stood off to one side, wearing a frock coat and top hat more reminiscent of the turn of the century than the 1920s. It certainly

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was nothing like the farm clothes young Hank Bringlow had been wearing on the day he vanished. But then the mayor wasn't planning to vanish, only to memorialize the event. He'd been a saddle and harness maker by trade, and lived to see his business die in the early 1920s with the growing popularity of the automobile. Luckily for him, he'd made a good profit in a real-estate partnership with Clipper Sweeney and gone on to enter politics.

"Ah," Sumerset said, walking over to shake my hand. "Here's my favorite sleuth now." He was a tall man with a ruddy complexion, and his gaunt features were sometimes called Lincolnesque by members of his own party.

"I'd rather be called your favorite doctor," I replied with a smile. "You know my nurse, Mary Best, don't you?"

"I've had the pleasure," he said, bowing slightly. For all his cordial demeanor, he seemed nervous.

Anna Nagle from the library came running over. "The band has arrived. We're almost ready to begin, Mayor." She was an ambitious young woman, a bit overweight but very vigorous, who'd become the unofficial town historian. Everyone liked Anna, and Northmont's wives were forever trying to find a suitable young man for her.

"Then I guess I'd better climb into my carriage," the mayor said, giving his horse an affectionate pat on the neck. "I'll see you on the other side, Sam."

He took the reins in his left hand and flicked the horse lightly with the buggy whip. At the other end of the bridge the band was tuning up.

"All this because a man disappeared here eighteen years ago," I grumbled to Mary.

"But you figured out what happened to him, Sam. Just go along with it and behave yourself."

"Hey, you're starting to sound like a wife."

"Huh!" was her only reply to that.

Joe Sweeney, barber-turned-real-estate-tycoon, appeared from the crowd to take me in hand. "Come on, Sam, I have to escort you to the other side of the bridge."

"I know."

We headed back across the covered bridge with Mary following along, and I wondered how many times I'd driven through it. Certainly close to a hundred, though this was the first time I'd walked it since the disappearance all those years ago. "I have to say the CCC did a good job of rebuilding this," I remarked, making conversation.

"It'll last another fifty years," Clipper Sweeney agreed.

Vera and the sheriff came through the covered bridge to meet us, and suddenly I heard the Shinn Corners high-school band launch into a lively medley of winter songs. Everyone was crowding around me and I heard Vera saying, "Sam, I want you to meet Dr. Brewster. He's filling in at the church."

I had the impression of thick glasses and a balding head. "I've heard

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nothing but good things about you," I told him, lying just a bit. "I'm sorry you won't be here longer."

"Actually, I might be. Your pastor may be facing surgery. I've lived around the area most of my life, so I'm a natural replacement."

Before I could pursue the conversation there was someone else to greet. Sheriff Lens had wandered over with the mayor's wife in tow. "Doc, you know Gretchen Sumerset, don't you?"

"Of course, Gretchen! You came to me once when you had the flu."

"I remember," she said with a laugh. "You prescribed some sort of powder. It had a foul taste going down but it did the job." She was a rosy-cheeked woman about my age, a good decade younger than the mayor. I remembered hearing that their daughter was away at college.

The band had stopped playing and the mayor's buggy paused at the other end of the covered bridge so he could say a few words into a microphone. The crowd, numbering perhaps two hundred people at our end, fell silent. "My fellow citizens of Northmont," he said, speaking through the crackling of the sound system. "Thank you for this fine turnout! As you know, we have come together here to celebrate the first of four seasonal events marking the founding of our town one hundred years ago. Later this year you will learn valuable lessons about Northmont in its early days, during the Civil War, and at the turn of the century. Today we commemorate a more recent event, that day eighteen years ago when Hank Bringlow disappeared from this very bridge along with his horse and buggy. It was the first of many local mysteries solved by a man who has become one of our leading citizens, Dr. Sam Hawthorne."

A wave of applause swept through the crowd and I felt Mary squeeze my arm. Somehow the whole thing embarrassed me, but there was no way out now. I saw that the band from Shinn Corners had come up behind the horse and buggy. Mayor Sumerset was going to lead a small parade through the covered bridge.

The band struck up "Yankee Doodle," our state's song, with the afternoon sun flashing off their shiny instruments, and the mayor urged his horse forward with the buggy whip, holding it high as he clutched the reins in his left hand. He was halfway through the bridge, with the band's music swelling up from behind, when something happened. The mayor's body seemed to jerk on its seat and toppled to the left. His top hat fell off and rolled a few inches back and forth on the bridge's flooring.

I was the first to move, dashing forward onto the bridge while the rest of the spectators seemed frozen in position. The band was still playing, but one by one the instruments were losing the melody and dropping out. When I reached the buggy Mayor Sumerset was lying on his left side with blood seeping from a small wound in his right temple. There were powder burns around the wound and he was dead.

It appeared that he'd been shot at close range while alone at the center of the covered bridge, with more than two hundred people watching.

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The next few minutes were a confusing blur, though I remember Sheriff Lens by my side, ordering everyone to stay back. There were uniformed band members clustered around, and Dr. Brewster from the church trying to fight his way through the crowd. I caught sight of Gretchen Sumerset, her face drained of blood, and immediately went to her. The living always took precedence over the dead.

"What—what happened?" she wondered, unable to comprehend.

"Your husband's been shot."

"Is he—?"

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid he's dead."

She started to topple and I managed to catch her, shouting, "Give us air!" to the crowd pressing in on us.

"Is she all right?" Mary Best asked, materializing at my side.

"I think so. Can you get her away from here?"

"I'll try."

A band kid with red hair and a tuba was in my way and I told him, "Look, get the rest of your band and regroup back where you were, okay?" He retreated and I turned my attention once more to the dead man. "Sheriff, can we get something to cover the body, just to keep the gawkers away?"

"I've got a blanket in my car. I already radioed for deputies and an ambulance."

"Good."

"How did it happen, Doc?"

"I wish I knew."

The ambulance was already arriving and the crowd cleared a path for it. Clipper Sweeney was acting as a traffic director, guiding it onto the bridge. "We'll want some pictures before they move the body," Sheriff Lens said.

"Of course." I turned and studied the bridge's wooden wall directly opposite where Mayor Sumerset had been riding when he was hit. The planks were tightly fitted, with no sign of a bullet hole.

"Remember the powder burns," the sheriff reminded me. "The gun had to be fired close up."

"I know, but there was no one here. There has to be some other explanation."

A couple of deputies had arrived to take snapshots of the scene before the body was removed. Sheriff Lens gave them instructions and then walked back over to me. "The only explanation I see is that some killer has given you a second impossible crime on this same covered bridge."

The winter afternoon continued sunny and most of the townspeople remained in the area of the bridge, talking in small groups about what they'd seen or hadn't seen. Mary Best and Vera were with Gretchen Sumerset, trying to comfort her, and I walked with Sheriff Lens, scan-

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ning the snow-covered ground for possible clues as we talked. "First we have to consider suicide," I said.

"There was no gun," he pointed out.

"You may remember during the previous covered-bridge mystery I had occasion to refer to the Sherlock Holmes story about Thor Bridge. In that one, a weight attached to the gun pulled it over a bridge railing and into the water after it was fired."

Sheriff Lens sighed in exasperation. "Doc, we don't have the time for any useless speculation. It's the mayor who's been killed and I have to get to the bottom of it or they'll have my head. We were all watching Sumerset ride through that bridge and he never had a gun in his hand. Even if he had, it couldn't have been yanked into the water by a weight because the sides and top of the bridge are enclosed. You couldn't even find space for a bullet hole."

"All right," I agreed. "I just wanted to eliminate the possibility of suicide. With that out of the way, the covered bridge becomes a locked-room murder."

"How do you figure that? It's a bridge, not a room."

"But there are only two ways in or out of that room, or bridge. The band was behind him and we were in front of him, some two hundred of us. You should know from past experience, Sheriff, that for any locked room there are only three possible solutions in a general sense. Either he was shot before he entered the bridge, or while he was on the bridge, or after he left the bridge."

"He never left the bridge," the sheriff reminded me. "Not alive."

"So we can rule that out. Could he have been shot as he entered the bridge, and kept on driving the buggy?"

"I don't see how. That shot would have killed him instantly. He was still alive as he rode through. He was urging the horse on. He had the reins in one hand and the whip in the other."

"I agree, Sheriff. So where does that leave us? He had to be shot and killed while inside the covered bridge, yet he couldn't have been."

Mary Best came along to interrupt us then. "Gretchen Sumerset is near collapse, Sam. I want to get her home and into bed. Do you have anything we could give her?"

"My bag's in the car. I'll get back to you, Sheriff."

I followed Mary to the car, unlocked it, and snapped open the black bag that was every doctor's talisman. "Give her two of these. They'll help her sleep. Here's a prescription in case she needs more."

"Thanks. I'll call you later." She headed toward Vera Lens's car, and I could see Mrs. Sumerset in the front passenger seat.

I stood for a moment studying the crowd, beginning to thin out now that the body had been removed. Anna Nagle, the librarian, was talking with Clipper Sweeney and I headed toward them. "What has the sheriff found out?" Anna asked me immediately.

"Very little, so far."

Her face, usually so serene, had a drawn and pasty look. "You know, I

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was helping the mayor on his research for these centennial events. He spent many an evening at my library digging through old newspaper clippings. I can't believe he's dead."

"None of us can believe it, Anna," I told her.

Clipper was shaking his head sadly. "Old Will was a one-time business partner of mine. He didn't deserve such a terrible end. When I had the barbershop he used to come in for a shave every morning on his way to the saddlery. It was a dying business even then, and I finally talked him into investing in real estate."

"When would this have been?" I asked.

"I think it was nineteen twenty-two, about the time you set up practice here, Sam."

"I may want to talk about that later," I told him. Just then I'd spotted Sheriff Lens and I wanted to continue our interrupted conversation.

The sheriff was questioning some of the kids in the high-school band as they prepared to board the bus back to Shinn Corners. None of them had noticed anything unusual, though one thought he might have seen a flash near the mayor's head. "Did you hear anything that sounded like a shot?" Sheriff Lens asked. No one had.

"Did you get their names?" I asked as the bus pulled away.

"My deputy did. Damn it, Doc, why didn't they see or hear anything?"

"They were playing 'Yankee Doodle' pretty loud. We were at the other end, further away from the music, and we didn't hear anything."

"Why didn't they see anything, then?"

"One thought he saw a flash. The sun was reflecting off their instruments so we can't be certain what anyone saw."

"We sure didn't see a gunman—or woman—walk or ride up to Will Sumerset and shoot him in the head!"

We walked over to where Doug Tanner was holding onto his horse and buggy, waiting for the sheriff's consent to take them back home. Doug was a bit younger than me and wore jodhpurs most of the time. He owned a couple of prize-winning horses and had ridden them at horse shows in Providence and Boston.

"Are you finished with the buggy?" he asked the sheriff.

"Let me just look it over first," I told Tanner. The horse was standing there quite contentedly. I patted him and turned my attention to the buggy. Its top was down, so no part of it had been close to the mayor's head. The killer had a clean shot at his target. I ran my hands over the frame and the upholstery but found nothing except a few drops of blood. "Nothing here," I told Sheriff Lens.

He motioned to Tanner. "Take it away. If we need anything else we'll be in touch."

I noticed what looked like the mayor's frock coat and buggy whip lying over against one wall of the bridge. "What's this?" I asked.

"The ambulance attendants took off his coat when they were working on him. I already checked the pockets. They're empty."

I went through them anyway, hoping the sheriff wouldn't be offended.

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After eighteen years I figured he knew all my little quirks. Then I picked up the buggy whip with its braided leather handle. It was carefully made and I wondered if Sumerset had done it himself. "Something's missing," I said, scanning the floor of the bridge.

"What's that?"

"His top hat. Where is his hat?"

While the sheriff and one of his deputies searched around the bridge for the missing hat, I went back over to Anna Nagle. Clipper Sweeney was gone but now she was talking with Dr. Brewster. "I could arrange a service," he was saying.

"Well, you'd have to speak with Mrs. Sumerset about that. I don't think the mayor was too much of a churchgoer."

She obviously knew more about him than I did. She turned to me with a sad smile and asked if she could help me. "I was wondering about those newspaper clippings the mayor was checking out at the library. Do you remember anything about them?"

She thought about that. "I know he was interested in nineteen twenty-two. Come by the library tomorrow and I'll see if I can find something."

Sheriff Lens returned empty-handed from his search for the mayor's hat. "I don't know what could have happened to it," he said. "Think it's important?"

"It could be very important. The man was shot in the right temple. That would have been just below the brim of the hat."

"I'll ask folks if they saw what happened to it."

I drove home alone, wondering how Mary Best was making out with Mrs. Sumerset. Before I'd been in the house twenty minutes the phone rang. It was Mary with her report. "She's resting comfortably now. I told her tomorrow would be time enough to think about funeral arrangements. She has a brother in Providence and I phoned him. He and his wife are driving here tonight, and her daughter should get home from college tomorrow."

"Good. I'm going to the library first thing in the morning. I want to speak with Anna Nagle about the historical material Mayor Sumerset was researching. I think I'm clear of patients in the morning but if an emergency develops you can reach me there. After that I'll probably check on Mrs. Sumerset."

Monday morning turned quickly into a January thaw, with temperatures climbing into the low forties and the snow receding to springtime puddles. I drove to the small square building that housed the Northmont Free Library. Only a few years old, the library prided itself on stocking nearly ten thousand books and a complete file of local publications. It was the logical place for the mayor to have begun his research into the town's history, especially with Anna acting as historian.

I slipped off my coat as she directed me to a large table and immediately began pulling out large bound volumes of our weekly newspaper. I had to dampen her vigor a bit and explain that what I really wanted

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was material from 1922, the year of the first covered-bridge mystery. "He must have been working on that first, wasn't he?"

"Well, yes," she admitted. "I think he got sidetracked a bit because that was the year of the big land deal, when the mayor and Joe Sweeney went in together to buy the Pascel and Oates farms. I think he was bothered by a certain date and he wanted that day's newspaper. Of course, we only have the weekly and he couldn't find what he was looking for."

"What was the date that interested him?" I asked.

"August fourth, nineteen twenty-two, a day on which nothing at all happened, so far as I can tell."

"Something happens every day, Anna. What day of the week was it?"

"A Friday."

"I'd only been here about six months then, and I was busy building a practice. Tell me about this land deal."

Anna Nagle smiled. "I was only in high school myself, but I was already interested in the town's history. It seems the Pascel and Oates farms adjoined, and both men died within a month of each other in early summer. Mayor Sumerset was a saddle maker then, and he used to get his hair cut at Joe Sweeney's barbershop."

"Clipper Sweeney."

"Yes, they still call him that. Anyway, one day the two of them got talking about those parcels of land, totaling more than six hundred acres in all, and decided that between them they might have enough money to buy both parcels for some sort of real-estate development. Because he knew the heirs, Mayor Sumerset handled the deal. Since those land parcels later became the successful Jennings Tobacco Company, I suggested the land deal be memorialized as one of Northmont's centenary events."

"The mayor wouldn't have wanted to honor himself."

"That's exactly what he said," she agreed, opening another bound volume for me. "That's why he chose your covered-bridge mystery in the same year. See, here's the Northmont paper for the week covering August fourth. The land deal isn't reported, though the parties seem to have reached an informal agreement that week. The mayor told me that Joe Sweeney telephoned the Oates nephew in Boston at the end of business that week and worked out the deal over the phone. It's a good thing he did because the nephew was hit by a car and killed that same weekend."

"Oh?"

Anna shook her head. "Nothing mysterious. A little old lady drove her new automobile out of the showroom and hit him a block away. In those days people didn't need a driver's test to get a license."

I wanted to get this clear. "You're telling me that the sale was completed on the word of a dead man, without any signed contract?"

"Well, of course there was a signed contract with the other heirs. But they had no reason to doubt Sweeney's account of the deal worked out over the telephone. He had detailed notes of the entire conversation."

I could only sigh for the good old days. "I guess people trusted each

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other a lot more back then. But there's the solution to your mystery involving Mayor Sumerset's interest in that date. You said the call was made at the close of business that week, which would have been Friday."

But Anna Nagle shook her head. "It wasn't that. Mayor Sumerset and I had already discussed the phone call. No, it was something else that he saw."

"Where? In this newspaper?"

"Or in one of the books we were looking through. I can't be sure."

"If anything occurs to you, call me at once." I put on my coat and went out into the sunshine.

Though it was after ten when I reached the Sumerset house, the shades on the first-floor windows were all drawn. It was as if the big house itself was in mourning. I saw the black Ford in the driveway with Rhode Island plates, and I knew the Providence relatives had arrived. Gretchen Sumerset herself opened the door to admit me. "Thank you for coming, Doctor. Mary Best said you might be stopping by."

"I'm so sorry about what happened, Gretchen. Sheriff Lens and I are working on every angle."

"I appreciate that," she said quietly, leading me into her sitting room. She introduced me to her brother and sister-in-law, who quickly excused themselves so we could talk privately.

"Did your husband have a special enemy who may have wanted him dead?" I asked when we were alone.

"People in politics always have enemies. There was no one special."

"No recent threats, nothing like that?"

"No."

"Did he have an office or study here at home?"

She nodded. "He's had one since we moved in twenty years ago, when he was still making saddles and harnesses."

"I wonder if I could see it. He may have made some notes on the centennial celebration."

"Of course." She led the way down a long, narrow hall to a small room at the back. "I love this house. Our daughter grew up here."

The study was in some disarray, but right on top of the desk I found what I was looking for. It was a pad with the date August 4, 1922 underlined at the top. The word *Bell* had been written beneath it and circled. Further down the page he'd written the name of Joe Sweeney. I tapped the pad with my finger. "Was this the date your husband and Sweeney completed the purchase of that farmland?"

"Where they grow tobacco now? Yes, it was around that time."

"Will and Sweeney had a falling-out about the deal later, didn't they?"

"That was business. It didn't involve me. My husband kept a file on it, if you wish to see it." She dug it out for me and I glanced through it, paying special attention to handwritten notes of a telephone conversation with the Oates nephew.

"Did Sweeney feel he was cheated?" I asked.

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"He had nothing to complain about. He made a handsome profit. They both did."

"May I have this top sheet off the pad? It might help, though I don't know how."

She waved her hand. "Take it."

I picked up a slender length of leather. "Is this a thong of some sort?"

"It's to be braided into a buggy whip. Will still made bridles and whips for people in his basement workshop. He was pretty much out of the saddle business, though."

"Could I ask about your current relations with Joe Sweeney?"

"Oh, we were both cordial when we saw him. It wasn't frequently, though."

I turned to go and then remembered something else. "Your husband's top hat seems to have disappeared after he was shot. Do you have any knowledge of its whereabouts?"

She looked blank. "None at all. I told him he was foolish to wear that thing, but he insisted on getting that and the coat down from the attic. He thought it would add to the celebration if he drove the buggy across the bridge wearing an outfit from the past."

Sheriff Lens was at his office when I arrived. It was a toss-up which of us was in the glummer mood. "I feel bad for Vera," he said, shaking his head. "All the time she spent working on this centennial project and it ends up with another murder on the covered bridge."

"The first time, eighteen years ago, was just a disappearance at first," I reminded him. "The two cases aren't anything alike, except for the bridge. Do you have the autopsy report yet?"

Sheriff Lens nodded. "Killed with a single thirty-two-caliber bullet, fired at close range. Is there any way that top hat could have been rigged to fire a bullet?"

"Exactly what I was thinking. We have to find it."

"If the killer picked it up in all the excitement, it'll never turn up now."

I took out the sheet of paper from the mayor's pad. Unfolding it, I asked, "Does this date mean anything to you, Sheriff? And *Bell* and *Joe Sweeney?*"

"Not a thing. Where'd you find it?"

"In Mayor Sumerset's study at home."

"Clipper Sweeney was always involved in shady deals. That's how he earned that nickname. He's always prided himself on being a shrewd operator."

"He's supposed to have closed that land deal with the Oates and Pascel families in August of twenty-two. Know anything about it?"

"Hell, Doc, my business has always been crime, not real-estate deals. I'll tell you who to ask about it, though. The Reverend Dr. Brewster. He was the Pascels' pastor and advised both families on the transaction. After the nephew died in that accident he said they should honor the verbal commitment to sell."

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"All right," I agreed. "Dr. Brewster is my next stop."

I found him at the little church facing the town square. When I walked in he was standing in the center aisle staring up at the church organ. "Hello, Doctor. I was just wondering where I could get enough money for a new organ."

"Well, times are getting better."

"They always do when there's a war on. It's good for everyone except the people who are being bombed out of their homes." He smiled sadly. "What can I do for you today."

"I'm still working on the killing of Mayor Sumerset." I showed him the sheet of paper. "Does this date mean anything to you?"

"August fourth, nineteen twenty-two? Should it?"

"I believe it was the date of a land transaction by which the mayor and Joe Sweeney acquired the property which later became the Jennings Tobacco Company."

"I remember that," he said with a nod. "I thought they were crazy at first, growing tobacco leaf this far north under big white sheets. That deal made Will Sumerset's fortune. And Sweeney's, too. The Pascels attended my church so I helped the family in their decision about the land."

"What was there about a phone call to the Oates nephew that day?"

Dr. Brewster nodded. "He lived in Boston, and he was negotiating for both families. That weekend he was hit by a car and killed. Sweeney said they'd talked to him on the phone for over an hour Friday evening and clinched the deal. There was no signed contract, of course, and the families asked me what they should do. The selling price seemed fair to me, so I told them to accept it. I had no idea Sweeney and Sumerset would make a huge profit by reselling the land to a tobacco company."

"But there was nothing illegal about it?"

"No. Sweeney had all the notes he'd made during their conversation. I believe they talked from just after six until nearly seven-fifteen."

"You have quite a memory."

Brewster smiled, obviously proud of it. "Names and dates are my specialty." He frowned at the paper he still held in his hand. "This word Bell, for instance. I'll bet I know what it means. Alexander Graham Bell died in Canada on August second of that year, and he was buried on the fourth."

"What a memory!"

"In fact, I can tell you something else." He was staring at the paper now. "But it's strange. It makes no sense."

"What is it?"

We were interrupted by his housekeeper coming over from the rectory. Sheriff Lens was phoning me, and it was important. I followed her to the phone and picked it up. "Yes, Sheriff?"

"Doc, I'm on my way over to Shinn Corners. They've found the missing top hat at the school."

"I'll meet you there."

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Though Shinn Corners was the next town from us, it had its own doctors and I rarely found cause to go there. The high school served the entire county, though, and Sheriff Lens's jurisdiction extended there. When one of the boys from the band showed up at school with a top hat, the principal had phoned the sheriff at once.

"I feel terrible about what happened," he told us in his office, on the way in to see the boy. "Mayor Sumerset phoned me on Friday and invited the band to play at the centennial event. He was excited about it and so was I. Who could have imagined it would end like it did?"

The boy's name was Michael and I recognized him at once. He was the red-haired tuba player to whom I'd spoken the previous day, right after the shooting. "It fell off his head and rolled right over to me," he told us in the principal's office, obviously frightened. "I collapsed it and slid it under the jacket of my band uniform. Nobody noticed. They were all looking at the body."

"Didn't you know that was stealing?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"The mayor was dead. He didn't need it anymore. I just wanted to bring it to class today and show everyone."

I turned the top hat over in my hands, but there was nothing inside. On the portion of the brim that would have been closest to the wound, there was a bit of scorching from the powder burns. It was the mayor's hat, all right, but it told us nothing.

"Just a dead end," Sheriff Lens grumbled as we left the school. A lecture to the boy about stealing evidence from a crime scene had put a proper amount of fear in him. "We're no closer to a solution than we were before."

"I wouldn't say that, Sheriff. I was having a very interesting chat with Dr. Brewster when you phoned me. It was all about the death of Alexander Graham Bell."

"Was he shot on a covered bridge too?"

"No, he died in Nova Scotia of diabetes, at the age of seventy-five."

"Then what does it have to do with—?"

"We both should have remembered it, even though it happened nearly eighteen years ago. Follow me back to Northmont, and I'll take you to meet our number-one suspect."

I led the way over the back roads, where the melting snow was fast turning everything to mud. When we reached our destination it was the big brick home of Clipper Sweeney, who'd come a long way since his early days as the barber of Northmont.

"You cracked the case yet?" he asked as he opened the door.

"Pretty much, Joe. Can we come in and tell you about it?"

"Sure." He led the way into the sitting room. "Is it too early for an afternoon drink, Sheriff? Doc?"

We both passed, but waited while he poured one for himself. "I think we have a motive," I began. "That's important in a murder investigation."

Sweeney laughed. "It's always sex or money, isn't it?"

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"This is money," I agreed, "in a sense. It dates back to nineteen twenty-two, the same year as the original covered-bridge mystery. Mayor Sumerset was researching facts for the centennial celebration and somehow he stumbled on this. We were all around at the time, of course, but only Dr. Brewster seems to have remembered that far back, to August fourth, nineteen twenty-two. It was the day you worked out the land deal with the Oates nephew on the telephone."

Clipper Sweeney closed his eyes for just an instant, as if he could see what was coming. "I think you've got it all wrong," he said.

"Not this time. Your notes indicate that you spoke with young Oates at his Boston office from just after six until seven-fifteen. The notes of the conversation are very complete. It's too bad it never took place."

"What?" Sheriff Lens said, his mouth open in surprise.

"It was the day of Alexander Graham Bell's funeral in Nova Scotia. As a tribute to Bell's invention of the telephone, on that day all telephone communication in the United States was shut down for one minute, at exactly six twenty-five P.M. Eastern Time."

"Yeah," the sheriff said. "Seems I do remember something, now that you mention it."

"Surely you would have noted a one-minute interruption in your conversation with the Oates nephew, Joe. The reason it wasn't mentioned was that you didn't make those notes on Friday but several days later, after you heard about Oates's death in that car accident. There never was any conversation. You relied on their believing you and going along with a deal that never happened. And by the time you'd made those notes you'd forgotten about the one-minute telephone interruption. All this centennial research brought it to light again. You knew Anna Nagle or someone else would realize the conversation couldn't have taken place as reported. Oates never agreed to anything before he died, and you closed the land deal under false pretenses. Your partner Sumerset had already discovered it, and I think you killed him rather than have the truth come out."

Joe Sweeney smiled sadly. "There's only one thing wrong with that theory. I didn't write up the notes of that telephone conversation because I never made it. Will Sumerset phoned young Oates in Boston on that Friday evening, or said he did. It was Will who wrote up the notes the following week, after we learned of Oates's death. Check the handwriting if you don't believe me."

But I believed him. It was suddenly all clear, everything from Joe Sweeney's nickname to the Shinn Corners high-school band. It all fitted together. "Come on, Sheriff," I told him. "We have to stop at your office for something and then I'm paying another call on Gretchen Sumerset."

This time she was alone in the big house when I arrived with Sheriff Lens, carrying a large paper bag in one hand. "They're doing some grocery shopping for me, and then they're picking up my daughter at the

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train station," she said, replying to my question about her brother and sister-in-law.

"Perhaps it's just as well we can talk alone," I said. "You understand that I had to bring the sheriff along with me."

"Yes." Her eyes met mine and she knew that I knew.

I sat down opposite her and began to talk. "Nearly eighteen years ago your husband and Joe Sweeney lied about a phone call to a man named Oates who had the misfortune to be killed by an automobile. It enabled them to purchase some valuable land at a lower price. No actual crime was committed, and the truth wouldn't have mattered to a man like Sweeney, whose shrewd business deals had already earned him the nickname of Clipper. But it was different for your husband, who was now the mayor of Northmont. The notes about that phone call were in his handwriting. It was his lie even more than Sweeney's, and if no crime was committed, it could still ruin his reputation. Perhaps he thought about you and his daughter, about this house and his election as mayor. It was all based on that lie, and I don't think he could have lived the rest of his life under that shadow."

Her expression hadn't changed. "Are you saying—?"

"I think you know what I'm saying, Gretchen. Your husband killed himself in such a way that it would appear he was murdered." I opened the paper bag we'd brought from the sheriff's office, and extracted the coiled buggy whip Will Sumerset had been using when he died. "He made this himself, of course. You told us he still made things like reins and buggy whips."

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper.

I held up the handle of the buggy whip and carefully lifted the piece of leather that covered a slender metal tube. "It was only made to be fired once. The thirty-two-caliber cartridge is still at the bottom of the tube, with a primitive firing mechanism. I remembered him holding the whip in his right hand, raising it to urge his horse forward. He raised it toward his temple, squeezed this firing mechanism, and fired the fatal bullet into his head."

"I still don't see why we didn't hear it, or see the flash of the powder," Sheriff Lens said.

"There were flashes all over, from the winter sunlight reflecting off those shiny brass band instruments. As for the sound of the shot, it was muffled by the horns and drums of the band marching toward us. The whole thing wouldn't have worked without the band playing. It was Mayor Sumerset who phoned the school on Friday and made a last-minute request for the band. I think that was the day he decided to kill himself, but in such a way that his reputation and his family name wouldn't be damaged."

"I suppose it's the only explanation," Sheriff Lens agreed, "especially with this buggy whip." He lifted the leather covering, then watched it drop back in position over the open metal tube. "But what if Clipper

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Sweeney or someone else had been blamed for the crime? Was that what he wanted?"

Surprisingly, it was Gretchen Sumerset who answered. "That wouldn't have happened," she said. She reached into her pocket and brought out a folded envelope which she handed to me. On the envelope was written, *To be opened only in the event that someone is arrested and charged with my murder.*

"It's been opened," I noted, turning over the envelope.

"I had to see what it said, of course. He left it in my sewing basket. Will was a good man. He tells the whole story here, from the phone call he never made back in nineteen twenty-two to his planned suicide with the pistol barrel he built into the handle of this buggy whip. He wanted to save his family from the pain of it, but not at the expense of an innocent person who might be falsely accused. You can use this any way you wish."

No official announcement was ever made about the death of Mayor Sumerset, but I guess the truth worked itself around town by word of mouth. In any event, it was the last mystery involving our covered bridge. After the war, in a burst of highway improvements, the road was widened to four lanes and the old bridge replaced with a new steel and concrete one. It was never quite the same. ●

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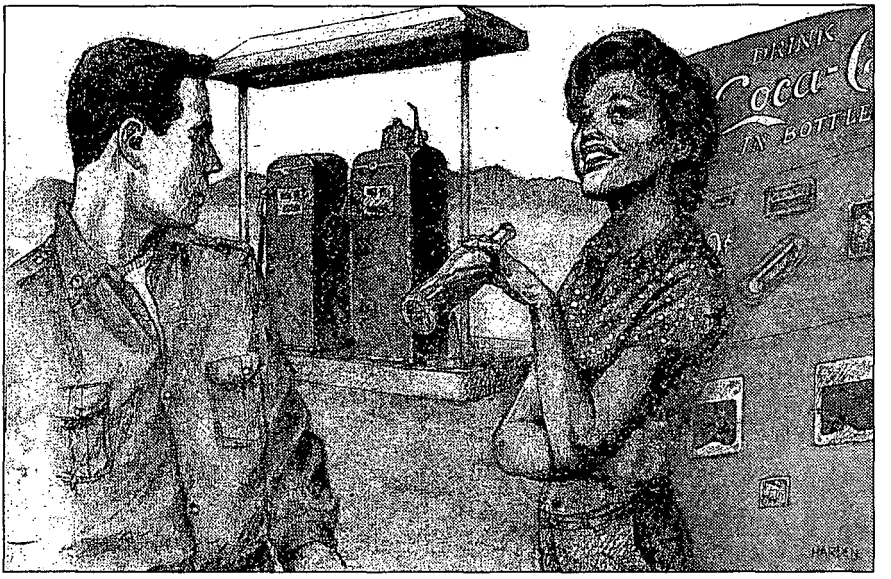

Art by Laurie Harden

DETAILS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

No more alcohol, no more steak. In the end, it's the little things that go, and you miss them like you miss a lover at odd times, at comfort times, at times when you need something small that means a whole lot more.

I've been thinking about the little things a lot since my granddaughter drove me to the glass and chrome hospital they built on the south side of town. Maybe it was the look the doctor gave me, the one that meant *You should've listened to me, George.* Maybe it was the sight of Flaherty's, all made over into a diner.

Or maybe it's the fact that I'm seventy-seven years old and not getting any younger. Every second becomes a detail then. An important one, and I can hear the details ticking away quicker than I would like.

It gets a man to thinking, all those details. I mentioned it to Sarah on the way back, and she said, in that dry way of hers, "Maybe you should write some of those details down."

So I am.

I know Sarah wanted me to start with what she considers the beginning: my courting—and winning—of her grandmother. Then she'd

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want me to cover the early marriage, and of course the politics, all the way to the White House years.

But Flaherty's got me thinking—details again—and Flaherty's got me remembering.

They don't make gas stations like that anymore. You know the kind: the round-headed pumps, the Coke machine outside—the kind that dispenses bottles and has a bottle opener built in—and the concrete floor covered with gum and cigarette butts and oil so old it looks like it came out of the ground.

But Flaherty's hasn't been a gas station for a long time. For years it was closed up, the pumps gone, plywood over the windows. Then just last summer some kids from Vegas came in, bought the land, filled the pits, and made the place into a diner. For old folks like me, it looks strange—kind of like people being invited to eat in a service station—but everyone else thinks it looks authentic.

In the spring of 1998, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, author of more than twenty science fiction novels, made her novel-length debut in the mystery genre. The book, entitled *Hitler's Angel,* received stunning reviews and Ms. Rusch seems poised to make her mark as a mystery writer. "Details," her second piece for *EQMM,* follows on 1997's short story "Models," which took fourth place in the *EQMM* Readers Award voting for 1997.

It isn't.

The authentic Flaherty's exists only in my mind now, and it won't leave me alone. It never has. And so I'm starting with my most important memory of Flaherty's—maybe my most important memory, period—not because it's the prettiest or the best, but because it's the one my brain sticks on, the one I see when I close my eyes at night and when I wake bleary-eyed in the morning. It's the one I mull over on sunny mornings, or catch myself daydreaming about as I take those walks the doctor has talked me into.

You'd think instead I'd focus on the look in Sally Anne's eyes the first time I kissed her, or the way that pimply-faced German boy moaned when he sank to his knees with my knife in his belly outside of Argentan.

But I don't.

Instead, I think about Flaherty's in the summer of 1946, and me fresh home from the war.

I got home from the war later than most.

Part of that was because of my age, and part of it was that I'd signed up for a second tour of duty, WWII being that kind of war, the kind where a man was expected to fight until the death, not like that police action in Korea, that strange mire we called Vietnam, or that video war those little boys fought in the Gulf.

I came back to McCardle in my uniform. I'd left a scrawny teenager,

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allowed to sign up because old Doc Elliot wanted to go himself and didn't want to deny anyone anything, and I'd come back a twenty-five-year-old who'd killed his share of men, had his share of drunken nights, and slept with women who didn't even know his name, let alone speak his language. I'd seen Europe, even if much of it'd been bombed, and I knew how its food tasted, its people smelled, and its women smiled.

I was somebody different and I wanted the whole world to know.

The whole world, in those days, was McCardle, Nevada. My grandfather'd come West for the Comstock Lode, but made his money selling dry goods, and when the Lode petered, came to McCardle. He survived the resulting depression, and when the boom hit again around the turn of the century, he doubled his money. My father got into government early on, using the family fortune to control the town, and expected me to do the same.

When I came home, I wasn't about to spend my whole life in Nevada. I had the GI Bill and a promise of a future, a future I planned on taking.

I had the summer free, and then in September, I'd be allowed to go East. I'd been accepted to Harvard, but I'd met some of those boys and decided a pricey, snobby school like that wasn't a place for me. Instead, I went to Boston College, because I'd heard of it and because it wasn't as snobby and because it was far away.

It turned out to be an okay choice, but not the one I'd dreamed of. Nothing ever quite turns out the way you dream.

I should've known that the day I drove into McCardle in '46, but I didn't. For years, I'd imagined myself coming back all spit-polished and shiny, the conquering hero. Instead, I was covered in the dust that rolled into the windows of my ancient Ford truck, and the sweat that made my uniform cling to my skinny shoulders. The distance from Reno to McCardle seemed twice as long as it should have, and when I hit Clark County, I realized those short European distances had worked their way into my soul.

Back then, Clark County was so different as to be another country. Gambling had been legal since I was a boy, but it hadn't become the business it is now. Bugsy Siegel's dream in the desert, the Flamingo, wouldn't be completed for another year, and while Vegas was going through a population boom the likes of which Nevadans hadn't seen since the turn of the century, it wasn't anywhere near Nevada's biggest city.

McCardle got its share of soldiers and drifters and cons looking for a great break. Since gambling was in the hands of local and regional folks, its effects were different around the state.

McCardle's powers that be, including my father, took one look at Siegel and his ilk and knew them for what they were. Those boys couldn't buy land, they couldn't even get anyone to talk to them, and they moved on to Vegas, which was farther from California, but much more willing to be bought. Years later, my father would brag that he stared down gangsters, but the truth of it was that the gangsters were looking for a quick buck, and they knew that they'd be fighting

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unfriendliness in McCardle for generations, when Vegas would have them for a song.

Nope. We had our casino, but our biggest business was divorces. For a short period after the war, McCardle was the divorce capital of the U.S. of A.

You sure could recognize the divorce folks. They'd come into town in their fancy cars, wearing too many or too few clothes, and then they'd go to McCardle's only hotel, built by my grandfather's dry-goods money long about 1902, and they'd cart in enough luggage to last most people a year. Then they'd visit the casino, look for the local watering holes, and attempt to chat up a local or two for the requisite two weeks, and then they'd drive off, marriage irretrievably broken. Some would go back to Reno, where they'd sign a new marriage license. Others would go about their business, never to be thought of again.

In those days, Flaherty's was on the northeastern side of town, just at the edge of the buildings where the highway started its long trek toward forever. Now Flaherty's is dead center, but in those days, it was the first sign you were coming into civilization, that and the way the city spread before you like a vision. You had about five minutes of steady driving after you left Flaherty's before you hit the main part of McCardle, and I decided, on that hot afternoon, that five minutes was five too many.

I pulled into Flaherty's and used one thin dime to buy myself an ice-cold Coca-Cola.

I remember it as if it happened an hour ago: getting out of that Ford, my uniform sticking to my legs, the sweat pouring down my chest and back, the grit of sand in my eyes. I walked past several cars to get to the concrete slab they'd built Flaherty's on. A bell ting-tinged near me as someone's tank got filled, and in the cool darkness of the station proper a little bell pinged before the cash register popped open. Flaherty himself stood behind the register in those days, although like as not by '46, you'd find him drunk.

The place smelled of gasoline and motor oil. A greasy Philco perched on a metal filing cabinet near the cash register, and it was broadcasting teen idol Frankie Sinatra live, a pack of screaming girls ruining the song. In the bay, a green car was half disassembled, the legs of some poor kid sticking out from under its side as he worked underneath. Another mechanic, a guy named Jed, a tough who'd been a few years behind me in school, leaned into the hood. I remembered Jed real well. Rumor had it he'd knifed an Indian near a roadside stand. I'd stopped him from hitting one of the girls in my class when she'd laughed at him for asking her on a date. After that, Jed and I avoided each other when we could and were coldly polite when we couldn't.

The Coke bottle—one of the small ones that they don't make anymore—popped out of the machine. I grabbed its cold wet sides and used the built-in bottle opener to pop the lid. Brown fizz streamed out

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the top, and I bent to catch as much of it as I could without getting it on my uniform.

The Coke was ice cold and delicious, even if I was drinking foam. In those days, Coke was sweet and lemony and just about the best non-alcoholic drink money could buy. I finished the bottle in several long gulps, then dug in my pocket for another dime. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was, or how tired; being this close to home brought out every little ache, even the ones I had no idea I had. I stuck the dime in the machine and took my second bottle, this time waiting until the contents settled before opening it.

"Hey, soldier. Mind if I have a sip?"

The voice was sultry and sexy and very female. I jumped just a little at the sound. I hadn't seen anyone besides Flaherty and the grease monkeys inside, even though I had known, on some level, that other folks were around me. I kept a two-fingered grip on the chilly bottle as I looked up.

A woman was leaning against the building. She wore a checked blouse tied beneath her breasts, tight pants that gathered around her calves, and Keds. She finished off an unfiltered cigarette and flicked it with her thumb and forefinger into the sand on the building's far side. Her hair was a brownish red, her skin so dark it made me wonder if she were a devotee of that crazy new fad that had women lying in the sun all hours trying to get tan. Her eyes were coal black, but her features were delicate, almost as if someone had taken the image from a Dresden doll and changed its coloring to something else entirely.

"Well?" she said. "I'm outta dimes."

I opened the bottle and handed it to her. She put its mouth between those lips and sucked. I felt a shiver run down my back. For a moment, it felt as if I hadn't left Italy.

Then she pulled the bottle down, handed it back to me, and wiped the condensation on her thighs. "Thanks," she said. "I was getting thirsty."

"That your car in there?" I managed.

She nodded. "It made lots of pretty blue smoke and a helluva groan when I tried to start it up. And here I thought it only needed gas."

Her laugh was deep and self-deprecating, but beneath it I thought I heard fear.

"How long they been working on it?"

"Most of the day," she said. "God knows how much it's going to cost."

"Have you asked?"

"Sure." She held out her hand, and I gave the bottle back to her, even though I hadn't yet taken a drink. "They don't know either."

She tipped the bottle back and took another swig. I watched her drink and so did most of the men in the place. Jed was leaning on the car, his face half hidden in the shadows. I could sense rather than see his expression. It was that same flatness I'd seen just before he lit into the girl outside school. I didn't know if I was causing the look just by being there, or if he'd already made a pass at this woman and failed.

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"You're not from McCardle," I said.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and gave the bottle back to me. "Does it show?" she asked, grinning.

The grin transformed all her strange features, making her into one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen. I took a sip from the bottle simply to buy myself some time, and tasted her on the glass rim. Suddenly, it seemed as if the heat of the day had grown more intense. I drank more than I intended, and pulled the bottle away only when my body threatened to burp the liquid back up.

"You just visiting?" I asked, which was the only way I could get the answer I really wanted. She wasn't wearing a ring; I suspected she was here for a quickie divorce.

"Taking in the sights, starting with Flaherty's here," she said. "Anything else I shouldn't miss?"

I almost answered her seriously before I caught that grin again. "There's not much to the place," I said.

"Except a soldier boy, going home," she said.

"Does it show?" I asked, and we both laughed. Then I finished the second bottle, put it in the wooden crate with the first, and flipped her a dime.

"The next one's on me," I said as I made my way back to the Ford.

"You're the first hospitable person I've met here," she said and I should've heard it then, that plea, that subtle request for help.

Instead, I smiled. "I'm sure you'll meet others," I said, and left.

Kinda strange I can remember it detail for detail, word for word. If I close my eyes and concentrate, the taste of her mingled with Coke comes back as if I had just experienced it; the way her laugh rasped and the sultry warmth of her voice are just outside my earshot.

Only now the memory has layers: the way I felt it, the way I remembered it at various times in my life, and the understanding I have now.

None of it changes anything.

It can't.

No matter what, she's still dead.

I was asleep when Sheriff Conner showed up at the door at ten A.M. two mornings later. I was usually up with the dawn, but after two nights in my childhood bed, I'd finally found a way to be comfortable. Seems the bed was child-sized, and I had grown several inches in my four years away. The bed was a sign to me that I didn't have long in my parents' home, and I knew it. I didn't belong here anyway. I was an adult, full grown, a man who'd spent his time away from home. Trying to fit in around these people was like trying to sleep in my old bed: Every time I moved I realized I had grown beyond them.

When Sheriff Conner arrived, my mother woke me with a sharp shake of the shoulder. She frowned at me, as if I had embarrassed her, and then she vanished from my room. I pulled on a pair of khakis that

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were wrinkled from my overnight case, and combed my hair with my fingers. I grabbed a shirt as I wandered barefoot into the living room.

Sheriff Conner was a big man with skin that turned beet red in the Nevada sun. His blond hair was cropped so short that the top of his head sunburned. He hadn't changed since I was a boy. He was still too large for his uniform, and his watch dug red lines into the flesh of his wrist. I always wondered how he could be comfortable in those tight clothes in that heat, but, except for the dots of perspiration around his face, he never seemed to notice.

"You grew some," he said as the screen door slammed behind my mother.

"Yep," I said.

"Your folks say you saw action."

"A bit."

He grunted and his bright blue eyes skittered away from mine. In that moment, I realized he had been too young for WWI, and too old for this war, and he was one of those men who wanted to serve, no matter what the cause. I wasn't that kind of man, only I learned it later when I contemplated Korea and the mess we were making there.

"I guess you just got to town," he said.

"Two days ago."

"And when you drove in, you stopped at Flaherty's first, but didn't get no gas." His tone had gotten sharper. He was easing into the questions he felt he needed to ask me.

"I was thirsty. It's a long drive across that desert."

He smiled then, revealing a missing tooth on his upper left side. "You bought a soda."

"Two," I said.

"And shared one."

So that was it. Something to do with the girl. I stiffened, waiting. Sometimes girls who came on to a man like that didn't like the rejection. I hadn't gone looking for her over to the hotel. Maybe she had taken offense and told a lie or two about me. Or maybe her soon-to-be ex-husband had finally arrived and had taken an instant dislike to me. Maybe Sheriff Conner had come to warn me about that.

"You make it your policy to share your drinks with a nigra?"

"Excuse me?" I asked. I could lie now and say I was shocked at his word choice, but this was 1946, long before political correctness came into vogue, almost a decade before the official start of the Civil Rights Movement, although the seeds of it were in the air.

No. I wasn't shocked because of his language. I was shocked at myself. I was shocked that I had shared a drink with a black woman—although in those days, I probably would have called her colored so as not to give too much offense.

"A whole buncha people saw you talk to her, share a Coke with her, and buy her another one. A few said it looked like there was an attraction. Couple others coulda sworn you was flirting."

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I had been flirting. I hadn't seen her as black—and yes, back then, it would have made a difference to me. I've learned a lot about racial tolerance since, and a lot more about intolerance. I wasn't an offensive racist in those days, just a passive one. A man who kept to his own side of the street and didn't mingle, just as he was supposed to do.

I would never have flirted if I had known. No matter how beautiful she was. But that hair, those features all belied what I had been taught. I had thought the darkness of her skin due to tanning not to heredity.

I had seen what I had wanted to see.

Sheriff Conner was watching me think. God knows what kind of expressions had crossed my face, but whatever they were, they weren't good.

"Well?" he asked.

"Is it against the law now to buy a woman a drink on a hot summer day?" I asked.

"Might be," he said, "if that woman shows up dead the next day."

"Dead?" I whispered.

He nodded.

"I never saw her before," I said.

"So you usually just go up and share a drink with a nigra woman you never met."

"I didn't know she was colored," I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me.

"She was in the shade," I said, and realized how weak that sounded.

The sheriff laughed. "And it's all the same in the dark, ain't it?" he said, and slapped my leg. I'd heard worse, much worse, in the army but it didn't shock me like he just had. I'd never heard Sheriff Conner be crude before, although my father always said he was. Apparently the sheriff was only crude to adults. To children he was the model of decorum.

I wasn't a child any longer.

"How'd she die?" I asked.

"Blow to the head."

"At the station?"

"In the desert. Her pants was gone, and that scrap of fabric that passed for a blouse was underneath her."

The desert. Someone had to take her there. I felt myself go cold.

"I didn't know her," I said, and if she had been a white woman, he might have believed me. But in McCardle, in those years and before, a man like me didn't flirt with—hell, a man like me didn't talk to—a woman like her.

"Then what was she doing here?" he asked.

"Getting a divorce?"

"Girls like her don't get a divorce."

That rankled me, even then. "So what do they do?"

He didn't answer. "She wasn't here for no divorce."

"Have you investigated it?"

"Hell, no. Can't even find her purse."

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"Well, did you trace the license on the car."

He frowned at me then. "What car?"

"The one the guys were fixing, the green car. They had it nearly taken apart."

"And it was hers?"

"That's what she said." At least, that was what I thought she said. I suddenly couldn't remember her exact words, although they would come to me later.

The whole scene would come to me later, like it was something I made up, like a dream that was only half there upon waking and then came, full-blown and unbidden, into the mind.

That your car? I said to her, and she didn't answer, at least not directly. She didn't say yes or no.

"Did you check with the boys at the station?" I asked.

"They didn't say nothing about a car."

"Did you ask Jed?"

The sheriff frowned at me. I'd forgotten until then that he and Jed were drinking buddies. "Yeah, of course I did."

"Well, I can't be the only one to remember it," I said. "They had it torn apart."

"Izzat so?" he asked, stroking his chin. "You think that's important?"

"If it tells you who she is, it is," I said, a bit stunned at his denseness.

"Maybe," he said, but he didn't seem to be thinking of that. He seemed focused on something else altogether. The look that crossed his face was half sad, half worried. Then he heaved himself out of the chair and left without even a goodbye.

I sat on the sofa, wondering what, exactly, that all meant. I was still shaken by my own blindness, and by the sheriff's willingness to accuse me of a crime that seemed impossible to me.

It seemed impossible that a woman that vibrant could be dead.

It seemed impossible that a woman that vibrant had been black.

It seemed impossible, but there it was. It startled me.

I was more shocked at her color than at her death.

And that was the hell of it.

I tried not to think of it.

I'd learned how to do that during the war—it's what helped me survive Normandy—and it had been effective during my tour.

But it stopped working about a week later when her family showed up.

They came for the body, and they seemed a lot more out of place than she had. Her father was a big man, the kind most folks in McCardle would have crossed the street to avoid or would have bullied out of fear. Her mother was delicate, with the same Dresden features as her daughter but on much darker skin. The auburn hair didn't seem to come from either of them.

And with them was her husband. He wore a uniform, like I did, and his eyes were red, as if he'd been crying for a long, long time. I saw

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them come out of the mortuary, the parents with their arms around each other, the husband walking alone.

The husband threw me, and made me even more uncomfortable than I had already been.

I thought she had flirted with me.

I usually didn't mistake those things.

But, it seemed, I made a whole lot of mistakes in that short half-hour I had known her.

They drove out that night with her body in the back of their truck. I knew that because my conscience forced me over to the hotel to talk to them, to ask them about the green car, and to tell them I was sorry.

When I got there, I learned that the only hotel in McCardle—my family's hotel—didn't take their kind. Maybe that, more than an assumption, explained the sheriff's remark: Girls like her didn't get a divorce.

Maybe they didn't, at least not in McCardle, because the town made sure they couldn't, unless they had some place to stay.

And there weren't blacks in McCardle then. The blacks didn't start arriving for another year.

The next day, I moved, over my mother's protests, into my own apartment. It was a single room with a hot plate and a small icebox, over the town's only restaurant. I shared a bathroom with three other tenants and counted myself fortunate to have two windows. The place came furnished, and the Murphy bed was long enough for me, although even with fans I had trouble sleeping. The building kept the heat of the day, and not even the temperature drop after sunset could ease it. On those unbearable summer nights, I lay in tangled sheets, the smell of greasy hamburgers and chicken-fried steak carried on the breeze. I counted it better than being at home.

Especially after the nightmares started.

Strangely, they weren't about her. Nor were they about the war. I didn't have nightmares about that war for twenty years, not until I started seeing images from Vietnam on television. Then a different set of nightmares came, and I went to the V.A. where I was diagnosed with a delayed stress reaction and given a whole passel of drugs that I eventually pitched.

No. Those early nightmares were about him. Her husband. The man with the olive green uniform and the red eyes. I knew guys like him. They walked with their backs straight, their faces impassive. They didn't move unless they had to, and they never talked back, and if they showed emotion, it was because they thought guys like me weren't looking.

He hadn't cared about hiding it anymore. His emotion had been too deep.

And once Sheriff Conner figured out I had nothing to do with it, he'd declared the case closed. Over dinner the night before I left, my father speculated that Conner'd just shown up to show my father who was

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boss. Mother'd ventured that Conner hoped I was guilty, so it'd bring down the whole power structure of the town.

Instead, I think, it just brought Conner down. He was out of office by the following year, and the year after that he was dead, a victim of a slow-speed, single-vehicle, drunken car crash in the days before seat belts.

I think no one would have known what happened if it hadn't been for those nightmares. I'd dream in that dry, dry heat of him just standing there, looking at me, eyes red, face impassive. Her body was in the green car beside us, and he would stare at me, as if I knew something, as if I were keeping something from him.

But how could I have known anything? I'd shared a Coke with her and gone on.

I hadn't even bothered to learn her name.

In the sixties they called what I was feeling white liberal guilt. Not that I had done anything wrong, mind you, but if I had known what she was—who she was—I would have acted differently. I knew it, and it bothered me.

It almost bothered me more than the fact that she was dead.

Although that bothered me too. That, and the dreams. And the green car.

I went to Flaherty's soon after the dreams started and filled up my tank. I got myself another Coke and I stared at the spot where I had seen her. The shadows were dark there, but not that dark. The air was cool, but not that cool, and only someone who was waiting for a car would choose to wait in that spot, on that day, with a real town nearby. She must have been real thirsty to ask me for a drink.

Real thirsty and real scared.

And maybe she took one look at my uniform and thought I'd be able to help her.

She even tried to ask.

You're the first hospitable person I've met here, she'd said.

I'm sure you'll meet others.

What she must have thought of that sentence.

How wrong I'd been.

I took my Coke and walked around the place, seeing lots of cars half finished, and even more car parts, but nothing of that particular shade of green.

Her family had taken her home in a truck.

The car was missing.

And as I leaned on the back of that brick building, the bottle cold in my hand, I wondered. Had the mechanics started working on the car because they too hadn't realized who she was? Had she gotten all the way to Nevada traveling white highways and hiding her darker-than-expected skin under a trail of moxie?

I went into the mechanic's bay, and Jed was there, putting oil into a

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1937 Ford truck that had seen better days. A younger man stood beside him, and I wagered from the cut of his pants and the constant movement of his feet that he'd been the guy under the car that day.

I leaned against the wall, sipping my Coke, and watched them.

They got quiet when they saw me. I grinned at them. I wasn't wearing my uniform that day, just a pair of grimy dungarees and a T-shirt. Even so, I was hot and miserable, and probably looked it.

I tilted my bottle toward them in a kind of salute. The younger man, the one I didn't recognize, nodded back.

"You see that girl the other day?" I asked. I might have said more. I try not to remember. I can't believe the language we used then: Japs and niggers and wops; the way we got gypped or jewed down; laughing at the pansies and whistling at the dames. And we didn't think anything of it, at least I didn't. Each word had to be unlearned, just as—I guess—it had to be learned.

Jed put a hand on his friend's arm, a small subtle movement I almost didn't see. "Why're you askin'?" And I could feel it, that old antipathy between us. Every word we'd ever exchanged, every look we had was buried in those words.

He wouldn't talk to me, not really. He wouldn't tell me what I needed to know. But his friend might. I had to play that at least.

"I was wondering if she's living around here," I said with an intentional leer.

"You don't know?" the younger asked.

My heart triple-hammered. I knew then that the sheriff hadn't told anyone he'd come after me. "Know what?"

"They found her in the desert with her face bashed in."

"Jesus," I said softly, then whistled for good measure. "What happened?"

"Dunno," Jed said, his hand squeezing the other boy's arm. Jed saw my gaze drop to his fingers, and then go back to his face. He grinned, like we were sharing a secret. And I didn't like what I was thinking.

It seemed simple. Too simple. Impossibly simple. A man couldn't just sense that another man had done something wrong. He needed proof.

"Too damn bad," I said, taking another swig of my Coke. "I woulda liked a piece of that."

"You and half the town," the younger one said, and laughed nervously.

Jed didn't laugh with him, but stared at me with narrowed green eyes. "I can't believe you didn't hear of it," he said. "The whole town's been talking."

I shrugged. "Maybe I wasn't listening." I set the Coke down beside the radio and scanned the bay. "What're they gonna do with that car of hers? Sell it?"

"Ain't no one found it," the younger boy said.

"She drove it outta here?" I asked. "She said it seemed hopeless."

Finally Jed grinned. He actually looked merry, as if we were talking about the weather instead of a murder. "Women always say that."

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I didn't smile back. "What was wrong with it?"

"You name it," the younger one said. "She'd driven that thing to death."

I knew one more question would be too many, but I couldn't stop myself. "She say why?"

"You got a reason for all this interest, George?" Jed asked. "You can't get nothing from her now."

"Guess not," I said. "Just seems curious somehow. Woman comes here, to this town, and ends up dead."

"Don't seem curious to me," Jed said. "She didn't belong here."

I stared at him a moment. "People don't belong a lotta places but that doesn't mean they need to die."

He shrugged and turned away, ending the conversation. I picked up my Coke bottle. It had gotten warm already. I took another sip, letting the sweet lemony taste and the carbonation make up for the lack of coolness.

Then I went outside.

What did I want with all this? To get rid of some guilt? To make the dreams go away?

I didn't know, and it angered me.

"Hey." It was the younger one. He'd come out into the sun, ostensibly to smoke. He lit up a Chesterfield and offered me one. I took it to be companionable, and we lit off the same match.

Jed peeked out of the bay and watched for a moment, then disappeared, apparently satisfied that nothing was going to be said, probably thinking he had the kid under his thumb. Only Jed was wrong.

The younger one spoke softly, so softly I had to strain to hear, and I was standing next to him. "She said she was driving from Mississippi to California to join her husband. Said he'd got back from Europe and got a job in some plant in Los Angeles. Said they'd make good money there, but they didn't have it now, and could we do as little as possible on the car, so that it'd be cheap."

"Did you?" I asked. And when he looked confused, I added for clarification, "Keep it cheap?"

He took a long drag off the cigarette, and let the smoke out his nose. "We didn't finish," he said.

I felt that triple-hammer again. A little bit of adrenaline, something to let me know that I was going somewhere. "So where's the car?"

"We left it in the bay. Next morning, we come back and it's gone. Jed, there, he cusses her out, says all them people are like that, you can't trust 'em for nothing, and that was that. Till the sheriff showed up, saying she was dead."

The car I saw couldn't have been driven, and the woman I saw couldn't have fixed it. She would not have stopped here if she could.

"You left the car in pieces?" I asked. "And it was gone the next day? Someone drove it out of here?"

He shrugged. "Guess they finished it."

"That would've taken some know-how, wouldn't it?"

"Some," he said. He flicked his cigarette butt onto the sandy gravel. I

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glanced up. Jed was staring at us from the bay. I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise.

I took another drag off my cigarette and watched a heat shimmer work its way down the highway. The boy started walking away from me.

"Where was she?" I asked. "When you left? Where was she?"

And I think he knew then that my interest wasn't really casual. Up until that point, he could have pretended it was. But at that moment, he knew.

"I dunno," he said, and his voice was flat.

"Sure you do," I said. I spoke softly so Jed couldn't overhear me.

The man looked at my face. His had turned bright red, and beads of sweat I hadn't noticed earlier were dotting his skin. "I—left her outside. Near the Coke machine."

With a car that didn't run, and no place to take her in for the night.

"Did you offer to give her a lift somewhere?"

He shook his head.

"Was the station still open when you left?"

"For another hour," he said.

"Did you tell the sheriff this?"

He shook his head again.

"Why not?"

He glanced at Jed, who had crossed his arms and was leaning against the bay doors. "I didn't think it was none of his business," the boy whispered.

"You didn't think, or Jed there, he didn't think?"

"Neither of us," the boy said. "Jed told her she could sleep in there by the car. But it woulda been an oven, even during the night. I think she knew that."

"Is that where she slept?"

"I dunno." This time the boy did not meet my gaze. Sweat ran off his forehead, onto his chin, and dripped on his shirt. He didn't know, and he was sorry.

And so was I.

If I was going to pursue this logically, then I had to think logically. And it seemed to me that whoever killed the girl had known about the car. I couldn't believe she would have talked to anyone else—I suspected she only spoke to me because I was in uniform. And if I made that assumption, then the only other people who would have known about her, about the car, about the entire business were the people who worked the station.

"Who was working that night?" I asked.

"Mr. Flaherty," he said.

Mr. Flaherty. Mac Flaherty, whom I'd known since I was a boy. He was a hard, decent man who expected work out of his employees, payment from his customers, and good money for a job well done. I'd seen Mac Flaherty in his station, at church, and at school getting his son, and I couldn't believe he had killed someone.

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But then, I had. I had killed a lot of boys overseas, and I would have killed more if Hitler hadn't proved he was a coward and did the world a favor by dying by his own hand.

And the Mac Flaherty who ran the station now wasn't the same man as the one I'd known. I'd learned that much in my few short days in McCardle.

A shiver ran down my back. Then I headed inside, looking for Mac Flaherty, and finding him.

Mac Flaherty was drunk. Not falling-down, noticeable drunk, but his daily drunk, the kind that made a man a bit blurry around the edges, kept him from feeling the pain of day-to-day living, and kept him working a job he no longer liked.

Once Flaherty'd loved his work. It had been obvious in the booming way he'd greet new customers, in the smile he wore every day whether going or coming from work.

But then he left for the war, like I did, only he came back in '43 minus three fingers on his left hand to find his wife shacking up with the local undertaker, and a half-sibling for his son baking in the oven. The wife, not he, took advantage of the McCardle divorce laws, and Flaherty was never the same. She and the undertaker left that week, and apparently, Flaherty never saw his kid again.

I went inside the service station's main area, and the smell of beer mixed with the stench of gasoline. Flaherty was clutching a can, staring at me.

"You harassing the kid?" he asked.

"No," I said, even though I felt that wasn't entirely true. "I was just curious about the woman who died."

"She something to you?" Flaherty asked.

"Only met her the once," I said.

"Then what's the interest?"

"I don't know," I said, and we both seemed surprised by my honesty. "Your boy says he left her sitting outside. That true?"

Flaherty shrugged. "I never saw her. Not when I locked up."

"What about her car?"

"Her car," he repeated dully. "Her car. I had it towed."

"At night?"

"That morning," he said. "When it became clear she skipped out on me."

"Towed where?" I asked.

"My place," he said. "For parts."

And those parts had probably already been taken, along with anything incriminating. I didn't say that aloud, though.

"You have any idea who killed her?" I asked.

"What do you care?" he asked, gaze suddenly back on me, and sharper than I would have expected.

I thought of Jed then, Jed as I'd seen him that day, staring at me, that flat look on his face. "If Jed killed her—"

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"I didn't see Jed touch nobody," Flaherty said. "And I wouldn't say if I did."

I froze. "Why not?"

Flaherty frowned, his eyes small and bloodshot. "He's the best mechanic I got."

"But if he killed someone—"

"He didn't kill no one."

"How can you be so sure?"

"What happened, happened," Flaherty said. "Let's not go wrecking more lives." Then he grabbed the bottle of beer he'd been nursing and took a sip, his crippled hand looking unbalanced in the grimy afternoon light.

By the time I got back with the sheriff, Jed was gone. Not that it mattered. The case went down on the books as unsolved. What else could it have been with the other kid denying he'd even talked to me, and Mac Flaherty swearing that the girl'd been fine when he drove by at midnight, fine and unwilling to leave her post near the Coke machine. He'd winked at the sheriff when he'd told that story, and the sheriff seemed to accept it all.

I went to Jed's apartment and found the door open, all his clothes missing, and a neighbor who said that Jed had run in, not even bothering to change, and packed a bag, then took some money from a jam jar he'd had under his bed and disappeared down the highway, never to be seen again.

He'd been driving one of Flaherty's rebuilds.

When I found out, I told the sheriff, and the sheriff'd been unimpressed. "Man can leave town if'n he wants," the sheriff said. "Don't mean he killed nobody."

No, I suppose it didn't. But it seemed like a huge coincidence to me, the girl getting beaten to death, Jed watching us talk, and then, when he knew I'd left for the law, disappearing like he did.

It was just that the sheriff saw no percentage in pursuing the case. It'd been interesting when he could come after me because of my family, because of the power we had, but it soon lost its appeal when the girl's family took her away. Took her away and pointed the finger at a good local boy, a mechanic who could down some beers and tell great jokes, who'd gone off to serve his country same as the rest of us. Jed had had worth to the sheriff; the girl had had none.

I don't know why he killed her. We'll never know now. Jed disappeared but good, and wasn't heard from until five years ago, when what was left of his family got an obituary mailed to them from somewhere in Canada. He'd died not saying a word—

Sorry. Got interrupted there. Was going to come back to it this afternoon, but things changed this morning.

About nine A.M., I walked into my front room, buttoning one of my

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best shirts in preparation for yet another meeting with that pretty doctor down at the glass and chrome white elephant, when I saw Sarah sitting in my best chair, feet on the footstool my granny hand-stitched, and all forty handwritten pages of this memory in her hands. She was reading raptly, which I found flattering for the half-second it took to realize what she was doing. I didn't want anyone to read this stuff until I was dead, and here was my granddaughter staring at the pages as if they were something outta Stephen King.

She looked up at me, her heart-shaped face so like Sally Anne's at that age that it made my breath catch, and said, "So you think you're some bad guy for failing this woman."

I shook my head, but the movement didn't stop her.

"You," she says, "who've done more for people—black, white, or purple—than anyone else in this town. You, who opened that civil-rights law practice back East, who fought every racist law and every racist politician you could find. For God's sake, Gramps, you marched with Dr. King, and you were a presidential advisor on civil rights. You're the kinda man who shows the rest of us how to live our lives, and you're feeling like this? You're being silly."

"You don't understand," I said.

"Damn straight," she said, and I winced, as I always do, at the sailor language she uses. "You shouldn't be mulling over this anymore. You did what you could, and more, it seems, than anyone else."

"And even that wasn't enough."

"Sometimes," she said, "that happens, Gramps. You know that. Hell, you taught it to me."

Seems I did. But that wasn't the point either, and I didn't know how to tell her. So I didn't. I took the papers from her, put them back on my desk where they belonged, and let her drive me to the doctor so that they both could feel useful.

And all the way there and all the way back, I thought about how to make my point so that girls like her would understand. You see, the world is so different now, and yet it's still the same. Just the faces change, and a few of the rules.

These days, Jed would've been arrested, or the sheriff would've been bounced out of office, or the press'd make some huge scandal over the whole thing.

But it wouldn't be that simple, because pretty women don't approach strange men anymore, especially if the strange men are in uniform, and pretty women certainly don't wait alone in gas stations while their cars are being repaired.

But they're still dying, because they're women or because they're black or because they're in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there's so damn many of them we just shrug and move on, shaking our heads as we go.

But that isn't my point. My point is this:

I wouldn't have marched with Dr. King if it weren't for that poor girl,

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and I wouldn't have made it my life's work to stamp out all the things that cause the condition I found myself in that hot afternoon, the condition that would have led me to ignore a girl if I'd noticed the true color of her skin.

Because I think I know why she died that day. I think she died because she'd flirted with me.

And that just wasn't done between girls like her and men like me.

Jed wouldn't have taken her to the desert if she'd been white. He would've thought she had family, someone who'd miss her. He might have roughed her up for talking to me. He might have had a few words with me.

But he didn't. I did something unspeakable to people of our generation, and he saw a way to get back at me. If I'd talked to her, then I'd want to do what was probably done to her before she died. And if she'd fought, then I'd have bashed her. That's what the sheriff was thinking. That's what Jed wanted him to think.

And all because of who she was, and who I was, and who Jed was.

The sad irony is that if I'd kept my place, she'd be alive, and because I didn't, she was dead. That had bothered me then, and bothers me now. Seems a man—any man—should be able to talk to whomever he wants. But what bothered me more was the fact that when I learned, on the same morning, that she was black and that she was dead, it bothered me more that she was black and that I had talked to her.

It just wasn't done.

And I was more worried about my own blindness than I was about one woman's life.

Since that day, hers is the face I see every morning when I wake up, and every night when I doze. And if God gave me the chance to relive any day in my life, it'd be that one, not, strangely, the day I enlisted or the day I deliberately misunderstood that German kid asking for clemency, but the day I inadvertently led a pretty girl to her death.

White liberal guilt maybe.

Or maybe it was the last straw, somehow.

Or maybe it was the fact that I had so much trouble learning her name.

Learning her name was harder than learning the identity of the man who killed her. It took me three more weeks and a bribe to the twelve-year-old son of the owner of the funeral home.

Not that her name really mattered. To me or to anyone else.

But it mattered to her, and to that man in uniform with the red, red eyes. Because it was the only bit of her that couldn't be sold for parts. The only bit she could call completely hers.

Lucille Johnson.

Not quite as exotic as I would have thought, or as fitting to a woman as beautiful as she was. But it was hers. And in the end, it was all she had.

It was a detail.

An important detail.

And one I'll never forget.●

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CAT MEDICINE

by Batya Swift Yasgur and Barry N. Malzberg

When the phone rang I was sure it would be Maggie.

I was right.

"Cat?" Her voice was wheezy, and I heard her gasping. "It's happened again."

"I'll be right over." I hung up the phone, grabbed my animal carrier, and was on my way.

I'm Cat. My real name is Catherine, but I love cats, hence the nickname. Between you and me, I love them even more than I love people, and everyone in the neighborhood knows that I'll take in any stray. Not that I don't love human beings: I'm a nurse, I work at Hillwood Hospital.

I have seventeen cats living in my house, and so many that I feed outside that I can't even count them. I just leave bowls of food all over the yard, and they come and go. I don't recognize all of them, and there are litters of kittens all the time, but I love to sit out on my porch at night and listen to them meowing, while I hold a purring little ball of fur on my lap. I pride myself on knowing that not a single kitten has been drowned in Hillwood since I moved into town two years ago. And lots of people have learned to love cats because of me.

Maggie was out on the porch when I drove up. "Oh, Cat, I'm so glad you're here. That animal's inside, and I've got to get to the hospital. I can hardly breathe. This is the worst attack yet."

"I'll get the cat over to my house, then I'll meet you in the Emergency Room. Can you drive?"

She nodded, her breath still coming in gasps, and as she got into her car, I coaxed the terrified little bundle, mewing and trembling, into my carrier and back to my house, where I set her up in a blanketed basket with a saucer of warm milk beside her. Then I sped over to the hospital.

Co-author of three novels with noted mystery author Bill Pronzini, and author, on his own, of novels and short stories in science fiction and other fields, Barry Malzberg has a unique voice and, according to critic William DeAndrea, one of mystery's "darkest visions of life and the universe." He writes in a lighter vein than usual this time, paired up with Batya Swift Yasgur, an *EQMM* Department of First Stories author from 1994.

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"Hey, Cat!" It was Brian, one of the orderlies. "How come you're here? You don't usually start work this early."

"I'm here to see Maggie again," I said. "Did she make it in here?"

"Oh yeah!" He pointed to one of the curtained cubicles. "I just wheeled her in there."

I pushed aside the curtain and found Maggie sitting on the white-papered table, little puffs of mist coming out of a mask around her nose.

"Thanks, Cat," she mumbled into the mask.

"Shh. Don't talk."

"It's all right." She removed the mask and held it up. "I'm all done anyway." She wiped her glasses. "I don't know what to do anymore. I'll have to leave town. I don't see any other choice. Whoever has been leaving me these miserable creatures must want to kill me."

"They're not miserable creatures!" I couldn't help myself. "Cats are wonderful, they're loving—" I could scarcely talk. "It's too bad you're allergic to them and all, but—"

She shook her head. "They're wretched, lousy things, they should all be drowned."

"You know, there are shots—"

She shook her head again, this time more vehemently. "It's bad enough I've had to go through allergy shots for mold, dust, and milk. I'm *not* going through all that pain for a bunch of flea-bitten cats."

I sighed. This wasn't the time or place for consciousness-raising. "Let's go through it again. A few times a week, someone breaks into your house or your office and leaves a cat there. You're allergic to cats, poor thing, what a tragedy—I can't imagine being deprived of cats—"

"No great loss," she said drily.

"—And being near one precipitates an asthma attack which could kill you if you don't get to the hospital in time, so—"

"Not quite," she interrupted me. "I can't say the person 'breaks in.' There are no broken windows or forced doors or anything like that. Whoever it is must have the key to my house as well as my office."

"What do the police say?"

She shrugged. "They don't say much. They don't really take it too seriously. They think someone is larking around, and they won't follow up on it."

"That's outrageous! Don't they understand that an asthma attack could kill you?"

Again she shrugged.

"So we have to be our own detectives." She looked dubious and I seized her hand. "Come on, Maggie, it isn't fair that you should have to be chased out of town by some maniac. And it isn't fair to use cats in that way either. We're just lucky you thought of me instead of the ASPCA, or all those darling kittens would have been put to sleep by now."

"Wouldn't have been a bad idea," she muttered.

I chose to ignore that. "We've got to get to the bottom of this."

At that moment, Brian came in. "The doctor wants to know if you're

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done with the medicine." Maggie nodded. "Good, I'll tell him." He turned to go, then turned back. "Hey, Maggie, this is scary. It's the fifth time in two weeks that you've been in the ER, and it took much longer for the medicine to work this time. Do you want me to come over and watch your house for you?"

Maggie smiled. "That's really sweet, but I don't think so. Thanks anyway."

Brian left, and after the doctor had come and gone, Maggie and I went down to the hospital cafeteria. We bought coffee and made our way over to a corner table where we could have some privacy.

"Who could want to kill you?"

Maggie set down her coffee. "I don't know. I've been asking and asking myself the same question, and I haven't come up with anything."

"You're divorced, aren't you? How about your ex?"

"Phil?" She laughed incredulously. "He's even more allergic to cats than I am. He wouldn't go near one."

"But he *does* have the key to your house, right? Or did you take it back from him?"

"He had the key to the old house, but not to the new one, and he's never had the key to my office."

I sipped my coffee, which was beginning to get cold. "How about the rest of your family? Does your mother or someone like that have a key?"

"No, she lives too far away, and my father died a long time ago. My sister lives in England, and anyway, why would they want to hurt me?"

"Why would anyone want to hurt you?"

"I don't know. I have no enemies, I run a small printing business and so I don't have any colleagues or coworkers I could fight with, my neighbors and I get along well—"

"Boyfriends?"

She shook her head. "After Phil—well, I couldn't, I mean, I haven't been ready to get involved again. A few men have expressed some interest, but I haven't really taken them up on it."

I drummed my fingers on the table. "Tell me again. When did it start?"

She pulled out a manila folder. "I keep all my hospital bills in here. Let's see . . ." She thumbed through the papers. "My first time in the Emergency Room actually had nothing to do with cats at all. I fell down the stairs and sprained my ankle. That was two months ago." She paused and frowned. "Wait! I never quite made the connection, but this business with the cats started right afterwards. I hurt my ankle on the first Tuesday of February, then I found a loathsome cat in my house—right there, meowing at me in the front hallway—early the following Thursday morning and, of course, I rushed to the hospital."

"Right, that's when I got involved. When you called me about Dilantin."

"About *what?*"

I laughed and felt my face turning red. "Dilantin is the name of a medication. I name all my cats after medications—I guess, being a nurse and all."

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She laughed too. "Cat, you're too much." She returned to her papers. "Okay, then the next cat was there on Friday, and the next one on Tuesday, the next one on the next Friday, then the following Tuesday I moved to the new house and I found a cat in my office, right on the desk, pawing at my papers."

"Right," I murmured, closing my eyes and picturing the succession of cats I had carted from Maggie's house (Insulin, Digoxin, Penicillin, Tylenol . . . adorable little puffs of fur danced across my mental screen, "wretched creatures," indeed!), and I barely heard as she continued her litany: "And the next Thursday, there was a cat in my new house!"

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday . . . Tuesday, Thursday—and then it began to fall into place, with the correctness of a cat finding a comfortable corner. "Look at those papers again. Have you ever found a cat on any day other than Tuesday, Thursday, or Friday?"

She rummaged through the folder, rustling papers, then looked up. "Never."

"I know who it is."

"What?" She grasped both my hands, her eyes shining, her breath coming fast. Too fast.

"Are you okay?" I asked, recognizing early signs of another attack.

She shook her head impatiently. "Never mind. I'll be okay when you tell me who's been doing these crazy things."

"I think it's Brian."

She stared blankly. "Who's Brian?"

"You know. The orderly in the Emergency Room."

"Why on earth—"

"Listen." I paused to collect my thoughts, which were tumbling all over the place like naughty kittens. "Brian works at the hospital Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. I bet the first time you came into the hospital, that time you sprained your ankle, he found a way to take your keys."

"That's right!" Her eyes widened. "He was there; in fact, he wheeled me in and we chatted a bit while I waited for the doctor to come, and then he wheeled me to X-ray. I hung my coat outside in the waiting room. My keys were in the pocket. They're labeled with bits of white tape—*house* and *office.*"

"It doesn't take long to copy a key. Sam's Hardware is just a couple of blocks away. He could have taken your keys and made copies. Gotten your address from your chart—home and office, right?—and also a list of your allergies, including cats. Driven over during the night, sneaked in quietly in the dark, and put a kitten inside your front hall. It wasn't someone who knew his way around your house, so he couldn't have dared to try putting the kitten someplace like your bedroom, where he'd have to grope around in the dark. Front hall was safe. He could open the door, plunk the cat on the mat, and leave. Since it was a frightened kitten—poor thing—he could be sure it wouldn't move far. That it would sort of sit and cower on the front welcome mat."

"And—and—" Maggie was sputtering, "And then when I moved, he

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couldn't use my keys anymore, and now I remember that the first time I found a cat in my office was the Tuesday right after I moved."

"Right." I nodded. "You were in the Emergency Room that Tuesday, and he probably found a way to duplicate your new house key, and your next cat was—"

"In my new house," she finished.

There was a long silence.

"But why would this guy want to kill me?" Maggie's voice wavered and she stared into her Styrofoam coffee cup.

"I don't think he wants to kill you," I answered.

She looked up quickly. "What do you mean?"

"I think he likes you. I think he more than just plain likes you—my guess is that he's in love with you, and he wants to see a lot of you."

Again her eyes widened. "Oh my God. You're right. That first time in the Emergency Room, he hung around until the doctor had to ask him to leave. He kept trying to start up a conversation, he even followed me to the car and asked if I needed help driving—it was my left ankle, and I had no trouble driving home—but he just kept at it. He never asked me out, but it's always the same guy who wheels me in when I'm here with asthma."

"I should have figured it out sooner," I said. "There's no reason why a person who can walk should always be put into a wheelchair when she's coming in and out of the ER."

"Do you know him? I mean, do you know anything about him?"

I squinted my eyes and leaned back to think. "Not much. He's a loner, very shy, never comes to hospital staff parties or anything like that. He works part-time, and none of us know too much about him." I stood up. "Let me handle this," I said. "I'll speak to the chief at the hospital, and we'll have Brian taken care of."

Maggie rose too. "Poor guy," she sighed. "But it's hard to be too sympathetic; I mean, he could have killed me with those awful animals."

"I'll let you know what happens," I promised and gave her a hug. "You go air out your house, and rest up."

The phone rang that evening. Maggie again, I knew.

"What happened?" she asked eagerly.

"He admitted it," I said. "And we were right on target."

"What's going to happen to him now?"

"That's up to you," I said. "If you want to turn him in I'll back you up. But he says that he'll never do it again. He was terrified. He swore that it was just because he wanted to know you better, to spend time with you, and saw no other way, and now that he's been scared to an inch of his life he's finished with it."

"Wanted to get to know me?" Maggie said. "That was the only way he could get to know me? To try to kill me?"

"He knew you could get to the Emergency Room. He figured it wouldn't be such a close thing but that you'd keep on coming in. What

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can I say? He's an idiot, but everyone has a blind spot, I guess."

"I want to turn him in," Maggie said. "Will you back me up? Will you come to the cops with me?"

"I'll do whatever you want," I said. "In the morning. I'll take you in to the police—Brian's already been dismissed from the hospital, but we'll get him formally arrested. Meantime, why don't you go upstairs and get some sleep? You must be done in."

"I am." Her voice sounded grateful. "And thanks for everything."

I hung up and waited.

Waited.

Fifteen minutes later, I called back. The phone rang once, twice, then it was picked up. She had a phone on her night table, I knew. "Hello?" Choking and wheezing again, the breath coming in gasps. "Hell—" But Maggie's voice was thick and panting, and then there was a long, drowning silence.

Good, I thought, good.

Then—"Cat—Cat—"

And a final silence. I held the phone and listened to it for a long time. There were meows here and there; poor Dilantin was crying to be taken home. I would have to come over to rescue her.

Dilantin had done her job well. I could call the police from Maggie's house. Brian had the right idea, just the wrong reason. And he didn't know his way around her house nearly as well as I've come to.

Someone who hates cats deserves to die. I can also duplicate keys.

So says the cat lady.●

"No, what I said was, 'I'm a counter-fitter'!"

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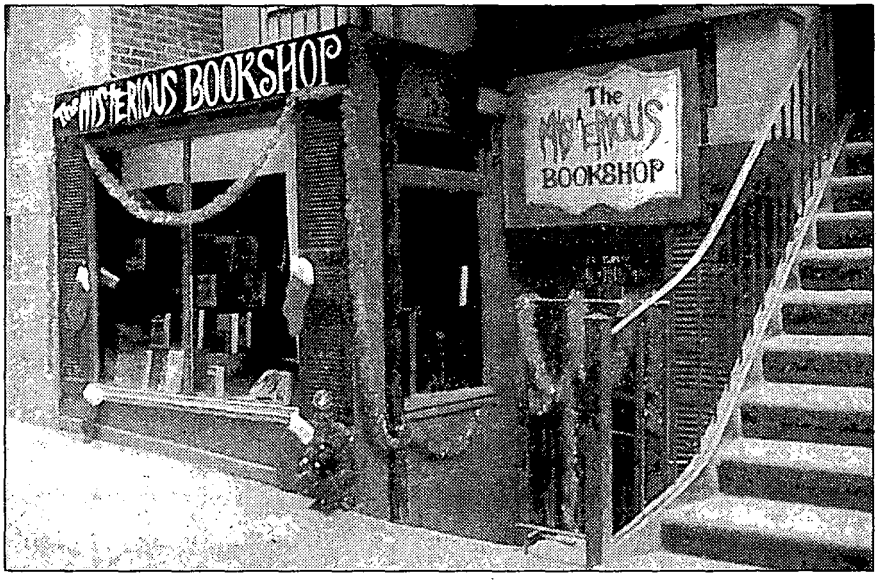

Photo by Shirley Chan

As Dark as Christmas Gets

by Lawrence Block

It was 9:45 in the morning when I got to the little bookshop on West Fifty-sixth Street. Before I went to work for Leo Haig I probably wouldn't have bothered to look at my watch, if I was even wearing one in the first place, and the best I'd have been able to say was it was around ten o'clock. But Haig wanted me to be his legs and eyes, and sometimes his ear, nose, and throat, and if he was going to play in Nero Wolfe's league, that meant I had to turn into Archie Goodwin, for Pete's sake, noticing everything and getting the details right and reporting conversations verbatim.

Well, forget that last part. My memory's getting better—Haig's right about that part—but what follows won't be word for word, because all I am is a human being. If you want a tape recorder, buy one.

There was a lot of fake snow in the window, and a Santa Claus doll in handcuffs, and some toy guns and knives, and a lot of mysteries with a Christmas theme, including the one by Fredric Brown where the mur-

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derer dresses up as a department store Santa. (Someone pulled that a year ago, put on a red suit and a white beard and shot a man at the corner of Broadway and Thirty-seventh, and I told Haig how ingenious I thought it was. He gave me a look, left the room, and came back with a book. I read it—that's what I do when Haig hands me a book—and found out Brown had had the idea fifty years earlier. Which doesn't mean that's where the killer got the idea. The book's long out of print—the one I read was a paperback, and falling apart, not like the handsome hardcover copy in the window. And how many killers get their ideas out of old books?)

A former Grandmaster of the Mystery Writers of America, Lawrence Block knows nearly everyone in the mystery business: fans, publishers, scholars, and, yes, bookstore owners. This new tale for Christmas was originally written for the author's friend Otto Penzler, owner of The Mysterious Bookshop, pictured on the opposite page. ✝

Now if you're a detective yourself you'll have figured out two things by now—the bookshop specialized in mysteries, and it was the Christmas season. And if you'd noticed the sign in the window you'd have made one more deduction: i.e., that they were closed.

I went down the half flight of steps and poked the buzzer. When nothing happened I poked it again, and eventually the door was opened by a little man with white hair and a white beard—all he needed was padding and a red suit, and someone to teach him to be jolly. "I'm terribly sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid we're closed. It's Christmas morning, and it's not even ten o'clock."

"You called us," I said, "and it wasn't even nine o'clock."

He took a good look at me, and light dawned. "You're Harrison," he said. "And I know your first name, but I can't—"

"Chip," I supplied.

"Of course. But where's Haig? I know he thinks he's Nero Wolfe, but he's not gone housebound, has he? He's been here often enough in the past."

"Haig gets out and about," I agreed, "but Wolfe went all the way to Montana once, as far as that goes. What Wolfe refused to do was leave the house on business, and Haig's with him on that one. Besides, he just spawned some unspawnable cichlids from Lake Chad, and you'd think the aquarium was a television set and they were showing *Midnight Blue.*"

"Fish." He sounded more reflective than contemptuous. "Well, at least you're here. That's something." He locked the door and led me up a spiral staircase to a room full of books, full as well with the residue of a party. There were empty glasses here and there, hors d'oeuvres trays that held nothing but crumbs, and a cut-glass dish with a sole remaining cashew.

"Christmas," he said, and shuddered. "I had a houseful of people here last night. All of them eating, all of them drinking, and many of them actually singing." He made a face. "I didn't sing," he said, "but I certainly ate and drank. And eventually they all went home and I went upstairs to bed.

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I must have, because that's where I was when I woke up two hours ago."

"But you don't remember."

"Well, no," he said, "but then, what would there be to remember? The guests leave and you're alone with vague feelings of sadness." His gaze turned inward. "If she'd stayed," he said, "I'd have remembered."

"She?"

"Never mind. I awoke this morning, alone in my own bed. I swallowed some aspirin and came downstairs. I went into the library."

"You mean this room?"

"This is the salesroom. These books are for sale."

"Well, I figured. I mean, this is a bookshop."

"You've never seen the library?" He didn't wait for an answer but turned to open a door and lead me down a hallway to another room twice the size of the first. It was lined with floor-to-ceiling hardwood shelves, and the shelves were filled with double rows of hardcover books. It was hard to identify the books, though, because all but one section was wrapped in plastic sheeting.

"This is my collection," he announced. "These books are not for sale. I'll only part with one if I've replaced it with a finer copy. Your employer doesn't collect, does he?"

"Haig? He's got thousands of books."

"Yes, and he's bought some of them from me. But he doesn't give a damn about first editions. He doesn't care what kind of shape a book is in, or even if it's got a dust jacket. He'd as soon have a Grosset reprint or a book-club edition or even a paperback."

"He just wants to read them."

"It takes all kinds, doesn't it?" He shook his head in wonder. "Last night's party filled this room as well as the salesroom. I put up plastic to keep the books from getting handled and possibly damaged. Or—how shall I put this?"

Any way you want, I thought. You're the client.

"Some of these books are extremely valuable," he said. "And my guests were all extremely reputable people, but many of them are good customers, and that means they're collectors. Ardent, even rabid collectors."

"And you didn't want them stealing the books."

"You're very direct," he said. "I suppose that's a useful quality in your line of work. But no, I didn't want to tempt anyone, especially when alcoholic indulgence might make temptation particularly difficult to resist."

"So you hung up plastic sheets."

"And came downstairs this morning to remove the plastic, and pick up some dirty glasses and clear some of the debris. I puttered around. I took down the plastic from this one section, as you can see. I did a bit of tidying. And then I saw it."

"Saw what?"

He pointed to a set of glassed-in shelves, on top of which stood a three-foot row of leather-bound volumes. "There," he said. "What do you see?"

"Leather-bound books, but—"

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"Boxes," he corrected. "Wrapped in leather and stamped in gold, and each one holding a manuscript. They're fashioned to look like finely bound books, but they're original manuscripts."

"Very nice," I said. "I suppose they must be very rare."

"They're unique."

"That too."

He made a face. "One of a kind. The author's original manuscript, with corrections in his own hand. Most are typed, but the Elmore Leonard is handwritten. The Westlake, of course, is typed on that famous Smith-Corona manual portable of his. The Paul Kavanagh is the author's first novel. He only wrote three, you know."

I didn't, but Haig would.

"They're very nice," I said politely. "And I don't suppose they're for sale."

"Of course not. They're in the library. They're part of the collection."

"Right," I said, and paused for him to continue. When he didn't I said, "Uh, I was thinking. Maybe you could tell me . . ."

"Why I summoned you here." He sighed. "Look at the boxed manuscript between the Westlake and the Kavanagh."

"Between them?"

"Yes."

"The Kavanagh is *Such Men Are Dangerous,*" I said, "and the Westlake is *Drowned Hopes.* But there's nothing at all between them but a three-inch gap."

"Exactly," he said.

"As Dark as It Gets," I said. "By Cornell Woolrich."

Haig frowned. "I don't know the book," he said. "Not under that title, not with Woolrich's name on it, nor William Irish or George Hopley. Those were his pen names."

"I know," I said. "You don't know the book because it was never published. The manuscript was found among Woolrich's effects after his death."

"There was a posthumous book, Chip."

"Into the Night," I said. "Another writer completed it, writing replacement scenes for some that had gone missing in the original. It wound up being publishable."

"It wound up being published," Haig said. "That's not necessarily the same thing. But this manuscript, *As Dark—*"

"*—As It Gets.* It wasn't publishable, according to our client. Woolrich evidently worked on it over the years, and what survived him incorporated unresolved portions of several drafts. There are characters who die early on and then reappear with no explanation. There's supposed to be some great writing and plenty of Woolrich's trademark paranoid suspense, but it doesn't add up to a book, or even something that could be edited into a book. But to a collector—"

"Collectors," Haig said heavily.

"Yes, sir. I asked what the manuscript was worth. He said, 'Well, I

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paid five thousand dollars for it.' That's verbatim, but don't ask me if the thing's worth more or less than that, because I don't know if he was bragging that he was a big spender or a slick trader."

"It doesn't matter," Haig said. "The money's the least of it. He added it to his collection and he wants it back."

"And the person who stole it," I said, "is either a friend or a customer or both."

"And so he called us and not the police. The manuscript was there when the party started?"

"Yes."

"And gone this morning?"

"Yes."

"And there were how many in attendance?"

"Forty or fifty," I said, "including the caterer and her staff."

"If the party was catered," he mused, "why was the room a mess when you saw it? Wouldn't the catering staff have cleaned up at the party's end?"

"I asked him that question myself. The party lasted longer than the caterer had signed on for. She hung around herself for a while after her employees packed it in, but she stopped working and became a guest. Our client was hoping she would stay."

"But you just said she did."

"After everybody else went home. He lives upstairs from the bookshop, and he was hoping for a chance to show her his living quarters."

Haig shrugged. He's not quite the misogynist his idol is, but he hasn't been at it as long. Give him time. He said, "Chip, it's hopeless. Fifty suspects?"

"Six."

"How so?"

"By two o'clock," I said, "just about everybody had called it a night. The ones remaining got a reward."

"And what was that?"

"Some fifty-year-old Armagnac, served in Waterford pony glasses. We counted the glasses, and there were seven of them. Six guests and the host."

"And the manuscript?"

"Was still there at the time, and still sheathed in plastic. See, he'd covered all the boxed manuscripts, same as the books on the shelves. But the cut-glass ship's decanter was serving as a sort of bookend to the manuscript section, and he took off the plastic to get at it. And while he was at it he took out one of the manuscripts and showed it off to his guests."

"Not the Woolrich, I don't suppose."

"No, it was a Peter Straub novel, elegantly handwritten in a leather-bound journal. Straub collects Chandler, and our client had traded a couple of Chandler firsts for the manuscript, and he was proud of himself."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"But the Woolrich was present and accounted for when he took off the

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plastic wrap, and it may have been there when he put the Straub back. He didn't notice."

"And this morning it was gone."

"Yes."

"Six suspects," he said. "Name them."

I took out my notebook. "Jon and Jayne Corn-Wallace," I said. "He's a retired stockbroker, she's an actress in a daytime drama. That's a soap opera."

"Piffle."

"Yes, sir. They've been friends of our client for years, and customers for about as long. They're mystery fans, and he got them started on first editions."

"Including Woolrich?"

"He's a favorite of Jayne's. I gather Jon can take him or leave him."

"I wonder which he did last night. Do the Corn-Wallace's collect manuscripts?"

"Just books. First editions, though they're starting to get interested in fancy bindings and limited editions. The one with a special interest in manuscripts is Zoltan Mihalyi."

"The violinist?"

Trust Haig to know that. I'd never heard of him myself. "A big mystery fan," I said. "I guess reading passes the time on those long concert tours."

"I don't suppose a man can spend all his free hours with other men's wives," Haig said. "And who's to say that all the stories are true? He collects manuscripts, does he?"

"He was begging for a chance to buy the Straub, but our friend wouldn't sell."

"Which would make him a likely suspect. Who else?"

"Philip Perigord."

"The writer?"

"Right, and I didn't even know he was still alive. He hasn't written anything in years."

"Almost twenty years. *More Than Murder* was published in nineteen eighty."

Trust him to know that, too. "Anyway," I said, "he didn't die. He didn't even stop writing. He just quit writing books. He went to Hollywood and became a screenwriter."

"That's the same as stopping writing," Haig reflected. "It's very nearly the same as being dead. Does he collect books?"

"No."

"Manuscripts?"

"No."

"Perhaps he wanted the manuscripts for scrap paper," Haig said. "He could turn the pages over and write on their backs. Who else was present?"

"Edward Everett Stokes."

"The small-press publisher. Bought out his partner, Geoffrey Poges,

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to became sole owner of Stokes-Poges Press."

"They do limited editions, according to our client. Leather bindings, small runs, special tip-in sheets."

"All well and good," he said, "but what's useful about Stokes-Poges is that they issue a reasonably priced trade edition of each title as well, and publish works otherwise unavailable, including collections of short fiction from otherwise uncollected writers."

"Do they publish Woolrich?"

"All his work has been published by mainstream publishers, and all his stories collected. Is Stokes a collector himself?"

"Our client didn't say."

"No matter. How many is that? The Corn-Wallaces, Zoltan Mihalyi, Philip Perigord, E. E. Stokes. And the sixth is— "

"Harriet Quinlan."

He looked puzzled, then nodded in recognition. "The literary agent."

"She represents Perigord," I said, "or at least she would, if he ever went back to novel-writing. She's placed books with Stokes-Poges. And she may have left the party with Zoltan Mihalyi."

"I don't suppose her client list includes the Woolrich estate. Or that she's a rabid collector of books and manuscripts."

"He didn't say."

"No matter. You said six suspects, Chip. I count seven."

I ticked them off. "Jon Corn-Wallace. Jayne Corn-Wallace. Zoltan Mihalyi. Philip Perigord. Edward Everett Stokes. Harriet Quinlan. Isn't that six? Or do you want to include our client, the little man with the palindromic first name? That seems farfetched to me, but— "

"The caterer, Chip."

"Oh. Well, he says she was just there to do a job. No interest in books, no interest in manuscripts, no real interest in the world of mysteries. Certainly no interest in Cornell Woolrich."

"And she stayed when her staff went home."

"To have a drink and be sociable. He had hopes she'd spend the night, but it didn't happen. I suppose technically she's a suspect, but— "

"At the very least she's a witness," he said. "Bring her."

"Bring her?"

He nodded. "Bring them all."

It's a shame this is a short story. If it were a novel, now would be the time for me to give you a full description of the off-street carriage house on West Twentieth Street, which Leo Haig owns and where he occupies the top two floors, having rented out the lower two stories to Madam Juana and her All-Girl Enterprise. You'd hear how Haig had lived for years in two rooms in the Bronx, breeding tropical fish and reading detective stories, until a modest inheritance allowed him to set up shop as a poor man's Nero Wolfe.

He's quirky, God knows, and I could fill a few pleasant pages recounting his quirks, including his having hired me as much for my writing

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ability as for my potential value as a detective. I'm expected to write up his cases the same way Archie Goodwin writes up Wolfe's, and this case was a slam-dunk, really, and he says it wouldn't stretch into a novel, but that it should work nicely as a short story.

So all I'll say is this: Haig's best quirk is his unshakable belief that Nero Wolfe exists. Under another name, of course, to protect his inviolable privacy. And the legendary brownstone, with all its different fictitious street numbers, isn't on West Thirty-fifth Street at all but in another part of town entirely.

And someday, if Leo Haig performs with sufficient brilliance as a private investigator, he hopes to get the ultimate reward—an invitation to dinner at Nero Wolfe's table.

Well, that gives you an idea. If you want more in the way of background, I can only refer you to my previous writings on the subject. There have been two novels so far, *Make Out With Murder* and *The Topless Tulip Caper,* and they're full of inside stuff about Leo Haig. (There were two earlier books from before I met Haig, *No Score* and *Chip Harrison Scores Again,* but they're not mysteries and Haig's not in them. All they do, really, is tell you more than you'd probably care to know about me.)

Well, end of commercial. Haig said I should put it in, and I generally do what he tells me. After all, the man pays my salary.

And, in his own quiet way, he's a genius. As you'll see.

"They'll never come here," I told him. "Not today. I know it will always live in your memory as The Day the Cichlids Spawned, but to everybody else it's Christmas, and they'll want to spend it in the bosoms of their families, and—"

"Not everyone has a family," he pointed out, "and not every family has a bosom."

"The Corn-Wallaces have a family. Zoltan Mihalyi doesn't, but he's probably got somebody with a bosom lined up to spend the day with. I don't know about the others, but—"

"Bring them," he said, "but not here. I want them all assembled at five o'clock this afternoon at the scene of the crime."

"The bookshop? You're willing to leave the house?"

"It's not entirely business," he said. "Our client is more than a client. He's a friend, and an important source of books. The reading copies he so disdains have enriched our own library immeasurably. And you know how important that is."

If there's anything you need to know, you can find it in the pages of a detective novel. That's Haig's personal conviction, and I'm beginning to believe he's right.

"I'll pay him a visit," he went on. "I'll arrive at four-thirty or so, and perhaps I'll come across a book or two that I'll want for our library. You'll arrange that they all arrive around five, and we'll clear up this little business." He frowned in thought. "I'll tell Wong we'll want Christmas dinner at eight tonight. That should give us more than enough time."

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Again, if this were a novel, I'd spend a full chapter telling you what I went through getting them all present and accounted for. It was hard enough finding them, and then I had to sell them on coming. I pitched the event as a second stage of last night's party— their host had arranged, for their entertainment and edification, that they should be present while a real-life private detective solved an actual crime before their very eyes.

According to Haig, all we'd need to spin this yarn into a full-length book would be a dead body, although two would be better. If, say, our client had wandered into his library that morning to find a corpse seated in his favorite chair, *and* the Woolrich manuscript gone, then I could easily stretch all this to sixty thousand words. If the dead man had been wearing a deerstalker cap and holding a violin, we'd be especially well off; when the book came out, all the Sherlockian completists would be compelled to buy it.

Sorry. No murders, no Baker Street Irregulars, no dogs barking or not barking. I had to get them all there, and I did, but don't ask me how. I can't take the time to tell you.

"Now," Zoltan Mihalyi said. "We are all here. So can someone please tell me why we are all here?" There was a twinkle in his dark eyes as he spoke, and the trace of a knowing smile on his lips. He wanted an answer, but he was going to remain charming while he got it. I could believe he swept a lot of women off their feet.

"First of all," Jeanne Botleigh said, "I think we should each have a glass of eggnog. It's festive, and it will help put us all in the spirit of the day."

She was the caterer, and she was some cupcake, all right. Close-cut brown hair framed her small oval face and set off a pair of China-blue eyes. She had an English accent, roughed up some by ten years in New York, and she was short and slender and curvy, and I could see why our client had hoped she would stick around.

And now she'd whipped up a batch of eggnog, and ladled out cups for each of us. I waited until someone else tasted it— after all the mystery novels Haig's forced on me, I've developed an imagination—but once the Corn-Wallaces had tossed off theirs with no apparent effect, I took a sip. It was smooth and delicious, and it had a kick like a mule. I looked over at Haig, who's not much of a drinker, and he was smacking his lips over it.

"Why are we here?" he said, echoing the violinist's question. "Well, sir, I shall tell you. We are here as friends and customers of our host, whom we may be able to assist in the solution of a puzzle. Last night all of us, with the exception of course of myself and my young assistant, were present in this room. Also present was the original manuscript of an unpublished novel by Cornell Woolrich. This morning we were all gone, and so was the manuscript. Now we have returned. The manuscript, alas, has not."

"Wait a minute," Jon Corn-Wallace said. "You're saying one of us took it?"

"I say only that it has gone, sir. It is possible that someone within

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this room was involved in its disappearance, but there are diverse other possibilities as well. What impels me, what has prompted me to summon you here, is the likelihood that one or more of you knows something that will shed light on the incident."

"But the only person who would know anything would be the person who took it," Harriet Quinlan said. She was what they call a woman of a certain age, which generally means a woman of an uncertain age. Her figure was a few pounds beyond girlish, and I had a hunch she dyed her hair and might have had her face lifted somewhere along the way, but whatever she'd done had paid off. She was probably old enough to be my mother's older sister, but that didn't keep me from having the sort of ideas a nephew's not supposed to have.

Haig told her anyone could have observed something, and not just the guilty party, and Philip Perigord started to ask a question, and Haig held up a hand and cut him off in mid-sentence. Most people probably would have finished what they were saying, but I guess Perigord was used to studio executives shutting him up at pitch meetings. He bit off his word in the middle of a syllable and stayed mute.

"It is a holiday," Haig said, "and we all have other things to do, so we'd best avoid distraction. Hence, I will ask the questions and you will answer them. Mr. Corn-Wallace. You are a book collector. Have you given a thought to collecting manuscripts?"

"I've thought about it," Jon Corn-Wallace said. He was the best-dressed man in the room, looking remarkably comfortable in a dark blue suit and a striped tie. He wore bull-and-bear cufflinks and one of those watches that's worth five thousand dollars if it's real or twenty-five if you bought it from a Nigerian street vendor. "He tried to get me interested," he said, with a nod toward our client. "But I was always the kind of trader who stuck to listed stocks."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's impossible to pinpoint the market value of a one-of-a-kind item like a manuscript. There's too much guesswork involved. I'm not buying books with an eye to selling them, that's something my heirs will have to worry about, but I do like to know what my collection is worth and whether or not it's been a good investment. It's part of the pleasure of collecting, as far as I'm concerned. So I've stayed away from manuscripts. They're too iffy."

"And had you had a look at *As Dark as It Gets?*"

"No. I'm not interested in manuscripts, and I don't care at all for Woolrich."

"Jon likes hardboiled fiction," his wife put in, "but Woolrich is a little weird for his taste. I think he was a genius myself. Quirky and tormented, maybe, but what genius isn't?"

Haig, I thought. You couldn't call him tormented, but maybe he made up for it by exceeding the usual quota of quirkiness.

"Anyway," Jayne Corn-Wallace said, "I'm the Woolrich fan in the family. Though I agree with Jon as far as manuscripts are concerned.

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The value is pure speculation. And who wants to buy something and then have to get a box made for it? It's like buying an unframed canvas and having to get it framed."

"The Woolrich manuscript was already boxed," Haig pointed out.

"I mean generally, as an area for collecting. As a collector, I wasn't interested in *As Dark as It Gets*. If someone fixed it up and completed it, and if someone published it, I'd have been glad to buy it. I'd have bought two copies."

"Two copies, madam?"

She nodded. "One to read and one to own."

Haig's face darkened, and I thought he might offer his opinion of people who were afraid to damage their books by reading them. But he kept it to himself, and I was just as glad. Jayne Corn-Wallace was a tall, handsome woman, radiating self-confidence, and I sensed she'd give as good as she got in an exchange with Haig.

"You might have wanted to read the manuscript," Haig suggested.

She shook her head. "I like Woolrich," she said, "but as a stylist he was choppy enough *after* editing and polishing. I wouldn't want to try him in manuscript, let alone an unfinished manuscript like that one."

"Mr. Mihalyi," Haig said. "You collect manuscripts, don't you?"

"I do."

"And do you care for Woolrich?"

The violinist smiled. "If I had the chance to buy the original manuscript of *The Bride Wore Black*," he said, "I would leap at it. If it were close at hand, and if strong drink had undermined my moral fiber, I might even slip it under my coat and walk off with it." A wink showed us he was kidding. "Or at least I'd have been tempted. The work in question, however, tempted me not a whit."

"And why is that, sir?"

Mihalyi frowned. "There are people," he said, "who attend open rehearsals and make surreptitious recordings of the music. They treasure them and even bootleg them to other like-minded fans. I despise such people."

"Why?"

"They violate the artist's privacy," he said. "A rehearsal is a time when one refines one's approach to a piece of music. One takes chances, one uses the occasion as the equivalent of an artist's sketch pad. The person who records it is in essence spraying a rough sketch with fixative and hanging it on the wall of his personal museum. I find it unsettling enough that listeners record concert performances, making permanent what was supposed to be a transitory experience. But to record a rehearsal is an atrocity."

"And a manuscript?"

"A manuscript is the writer's completed work. It provides a record of how he arranged and revised his ideas, and how they were in turn adjusted for better or worse by an editor. But it is finished work. An unfinished manuscript . . ."

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"Is a rehearsal?"

"That or something worse. I ask myself, what would Woolrich have wanted?"

"Another drink," Edward Everett Stokes said, and leaned forward to help himself to more eggnog. "I take your point, Mihalyi. And Woolrich might well have preferred to have his unfinished work destroyed upon his death, but he left no instructions to that effect, so how can we presume to guess his wishes? Perhaps, for all we know, there is a single scene in the book that meant as much to him as anything he'd written. Or less than a scene— a bit of dialogue, a paragraph of description, perhaps no more than a single sentence. Who are we to say it should not survive?"

"Perigord," Mihalyi said. "You are a writer. Would you care to have your unfinished work published after your death? Would you not recoil at that, or at having it completed by others?"

Philip Perigord cocked an eyebrow. "I'm the wrong person to ask," he said. "I've spent twenty years in Hollywood. Forget unfinished work. My *finished* work doesn't get published, or 'produced,' as they so revealingly term it. I get paid, and the work winds up on a shelf. And, when it comes to having one's work completed by others, in Hollywood you don't have to wait until you're dead. It happens during your lifetime, and you learn to live with it."

"We don't know the author's wishes," Harriet Quinlan put in, "and I wonder how relevant they are."

"But it's his work," Mihalyi pointed out.

"Is it, Zoltan? Or does it belong to the ages? Finished or not, the author has left it to us. Schubert did not finish one of his greatest symphonies. Would you have laid its two completed movements in the casket with him?"

"It has been argued that the work was complete, that he intended it to be but two movements long."

"That begs the question, Zoltan."

"It does, dear lady," he said with a wink. "I'd rather beg the question than be undone by it. Of course I'd keep the *Unfinished Symphony* in the repertoire. On the other hand, I'd hate to see some fool attempt to finish it."

"No one has, have they?"

"Not to my knowledge. But several writers have had the effrontery to finish *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* and I do think Dickens would have been better served if the manuscript had gone in the box with his bones. And as for sequels, like those for *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Big Sleep,* or that young fellow who had the colossal gall to tread in Rex Stout's immortal footsteps . . ."

Now we were getting onto sensitive ground. As far as Leo Haig was concerned, Archie Goodwin had always written up Wolfe's cases, using the transparent pseudonym of Rex Stout. (Rex Stout = fat king, an allusion to Wolfe's own regal corpulence.) Robert Goldsborough, credited with the books written since the "death" of Stout, was, as Haig saw it, a

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ghostwriter employed by Goodwin, who was no longer up to the chore of hammering out the books. He'd relate them to Goldsborough, who transcribed them and polished them up. While they might not have all the narrative verve of Goodwin's own work, still they provided an important and accurate account of Wolfe's more recent cases.

See, Haig feels the great man's still alive and still raising orchids and nailing killers. Maybe somewhere on the Upper East Side. Maybe in Murray Hill, or just off Gramercy Park . . .

The discussion about Goldsborough, and about sequels in general, roused Haig from a torpor that Wolfe himself might have envied. "Enough," he said with authority. "There's no time for meandering literary conversations, nor would Chip have room for them in a short-story-length report. So let us get to it. One of you took the manuscript, box and all, from its place on the shelf. Mr. Mihalyi, you have the air of one who protests too much. You profess no interest in the manuscripts of unpublished novels, and I can accept that you did not yearn to possess *As Dark as It Gets,* but you wanted a look at it, didn't you?"

"I don't own a Woolrich manuscript," he said, "and of course I was interested in seeing what one looked like. How he typed, how he entered corrections . . ."

"So you took the manuscript from the shelf."

"Yes," the violinist agreed. "I went into the other room with it, opened the box, and flipped through the pages. You can taste the flavor of the man's work in the visual appearance of his manuscript pages. The words and phrases x'd out, the pencil notations, the crossovers, even the typographical errors. The computer age puts paid to all that, doesn't it? Imagine Chandler running Spel-Chek, or Hammett with justified margins." He sighed. "A few minutes with the script made me long to own one of Woolrich's. But not this one, for reasons I've already explained."

"You spent how long with the book?"

"Fifteen minutes at the most. Probably more like ten."

"And returned to this room?"

"Yes."

"And brought the manuscript with you?"

"Yes. I intended to return it to the shelf, but someone was standing in the way. It may have been you, Jon. It was someone tall, and you're the tallest person here." He turned to our client. "It wasn't you. But I think you may have been talking with Jon. Someone was, at any rate, and I'd have had to step between the two of you to put the box back, and that might have led to questions as to why I'd picked it up in the first place. So I put it down."

"Where?"

"On a table. That one, I think."

"It's not there now," Jon Corn-Wallace said.

"It's not," Haig agreed. "One of you took it from that table. I could, through an exhausting process of cross-questioning, establish who that person is. But it would save us all time if the person

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would simply recount what happened next."

There was a silence while they all looked at each other. "Well, I guess this is where I come in," Jayne Corn-Wallace said. "I was sitting in the red chair, where Phil Perigord is sitting now. And whoever I'd been talking to went to get another drink, and I looked around, and there it was on the table."

"The manuscript, madam?"

"Yes, but I didn't know that was what it was, not at first. I thought it was a finely bound limited edition. Because the manuscripts are all kept on that shelf, you know, and this one wasn't. And it hadn't been on the table a few minutes earlier, either. I knew that much. So I assumed it was a book someone had been leafing through, and I saw it was by Cornell Woolrich, and I didn't recognize the title, so I thought I'd try leafing through it myself."

"And you found it was a manuscript."

"Well, that didn't take too keen an eye, did it? I suppose I glanced at the first twenty pages, just riffled through them while the party went on around me. I stopped after a chapter or so. That was plenty."

"You didn't like what you read?"

"There were corrections," she said disdainfully. "Words and whole sentences crossed out, new words penciled in. I realize writers have to work that way, but when I read a book I like to believe it emerged from the writer's mind fully formed."

"Like Athena from the brow of What's-his-name," her husband said.

"Zeus. I don't want to know there was a writer at work, making decisions, putting words down and then changing them. I want to forget about the writer entirely and lose myself in the story."

"Everybody wants to forget about the writer," Philip Perigord said, helping himself to more eggnog. "At the Oscars each year some ninny intones, 'In the beginning was the Word,' before he hands out the screenwriting awards. And you hear the usual crap about how they owe it all to chaps like me who put words in their mouths. They say it, but nobody believes it. Jack Warner called us schmucks with Underwoods. Well, we've come a long way. Now we're schmucks with Power Macs."

"Indeed," Haig said. "You looked at the manuscript, didn't you, Mr. Perigord?"

"I never read unpublished work. Can't risk leaving myself open to a plagiarism charge."

"Oh? But didn't you have a special interest in Woolrich? Didn't you once adapt a story of his?"

"How did you know about that? I was one of several who made a living off that particular piece of crap. It was never produced."

"And you looked at this manuscript in the hope that you might adapt it?"

The writer shook his head. "I'm through wasting myself out there."

"They're through with you," Harriet Quinlan said. "Nothing personal, Phil, but it's a town that uses up writers and throws them away. You

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couldn't get arrested out there. So you've come back East to write books."

"And you'll be representing him, madam?"

"I may, if he brings me something I can sell. I saw him paging through a manuscript and figured he was looking for something he could steal. Oh, don't look so outraged, Phil. Why not steal from Woolrich, for God's sake? He's not going to sue. He left everything to Columbia University, and you could knock off anything of his, published or unpublished, and they'd never know the difference. Ever since I saw you reading, I've been wondering. Did you come across anything worth stealing?"

"I don't steal," Perigord said. "Still, perfectly legitimate inspiration can result from a glance at another man's work—"

"I'll say it can. And did it?"

He shook his head. "If there was a strong idea anywhere in that manuscript, I couldn't find it in the few minutes I spent looking. What about you, Harriet? I know you had a look at it, because I saw you."

"I just wanted to see what it was you'd been so caught up in. And I wondered if the manuscript might be salvageable. One of my writers might be able to pull it off, and do a better job than the hack who finished *Into the Night.*"

"Ah," Haig said. "And what did you determine, madam?"

"I didn't read enough to form a judgment. Anyway, *Into the Night* was no great commercial success, so why tag along in its wake?"

"So you put the manuscript . . ."

"Back in its box, and left it on the table where I'd found it."

Our client shook his head in wonder. *"Murder on the Orient Express,"* he said. "Or in the Calais coach, depending on whether you're English or American. It's beginning to look as though *everyone* read that manuscript. And I never noticed a thing!"

"Well, you were hitting the sauce pretty good," Jon Corn-Wallace reminded him. "And you were, uh, concentrating all your social energy in one direction."

"How's that?"

Corn-Wallace nodded toward Jeanne Botleigh, who was refilling someone's cup. "As far as you were concerned, our lovely caterer was the only person in the room."

There was an awkward silence, with our host coloring and his caterer lowering her eyes demurely. Haig broke it. "To continue," he said abruptly. "Miss Quinlan returned the manuscript to its box and to its place upon the table. Then—"

"But she didn't," Perigord said. "Harriet, I wanted another look at Woolrich. Maybe I'd missed something. But first I saw you reading it, and when I looked a second time it was gone. You weren't reading it and it wasn't on the table, either."

"I put it back," the agent said.

"But not where you found it," said Edward Everett Stokes. "You set it down not on the table but on that revolving bookcase."

"Did I? I suppose it's possible. But how did you know that?"

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"Because I saw you," said the small-press publisher. "And because I wanted a look at the manuscript myself. I knew about it, including the fact that it was not restorable in the fashion of *Into the Night.* That made it valueless to a commercial publisher, but the idea of a Woolrich novel going unpublished ate away at me. I mean, we're talking about Cornell Woolrich."

"And you thought—"

"I thought, why not publish it as is, warts and all? I could do it, in an edition of two or three hundred copies, for collectors who'd happily accept inconsistencies and omissions for the sake of having something otherwise unobtainable. I wanted a few minutes peace and quiet with the book, so I took it into the lavatory."

"And?"

"And I read it, or at least paged through it. I must have spent half an hour in there, or close to it."

"I remember you were gone awhile," Jon Corn-Wallace said. "I thought you'd headed on home."

"I thought he was in the other room," Jayne said, "cavorting on the pile of coats with Harriet here. But I guess that must have been someone else."

"It was Zoltan," the agent said, "and we were hardly cavorting."

"Kanoodling, then, but—"

"He was teaching me a yogic breathing technique, not that it's any of your business. Stokes, you took the manuscript into the john. I trust you brought it back?"

"Well, no."

"You took it home? You're the person responsible for its disappearance?"

"Certainly not. I didn't take it home, and I hope I'm not responsible for its disappearance. I left it in the lavatory."

"You just left it there?"

"In its box, on the shelf over the vanity. I set it down there while I washed my hands, and I'm afraid I forgot it. And no, it's not there now. I went and looked as soon as I realized what all this was about, and I'm afraid some other hands than mine must have moved it. I'll tell you this—when it does turn up, I definitely want to publish it."

"If it turns up," our client said darkly. "Once E. E. left it in the bathroom, anyone could have slipped it under his coat without being seen. And I'll probably never see it again."

"But that means one of us is a thief," somebody said.

"I know, and that's out of the question. You're all my friends. But we were all drinking last night, and drink can confuse a person. Suppose one of you did take it from the bathroom and carried it home as a joke, the kind of joke that can seem funny after a few drinks. If you could contrive to return it, perhaps in such a way that no one could know your identity . . . Haig, you ought to be able to work that out."

"I could," Haig agreed. "If that were how it happened. But it didn't."

"It didn't?"

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"You forget the least obvious suspect."

"Me? Dammit, Haig, are you saying I stole my own manuscript?"

"I'm saying the butler did it," Haig said, "or the closest thing we have to a butler. Miss Botleigh, your upper lip has been trembling almost since we all sat down. You've been on the point of an admission throughout and haven't said a word. Have you in fact read the manuscript of *As Dark as It Gets?*"

"Yes."

The client gasped. "You have? When?"

"Last night."

"But—"

"I had to use the lavatory," she said, "and the book was there, although I could see it wasn't an ordinary bound book but pages in a box. I didn't think I would hurt it by looking at it. So I sat there and read the first two chapters."

"What did you think?" Haig asked her.

"It was very powerful. Parts of it were hard to follow, but the scenes were strong, and I got caught up in them."

"That's Woolrich," Jayne Corn-Wallace said. "He can grab you, all right."

"And then you took it with you when you went home," our client said. "You were so involved you couldn't bear to leave it unfinished, so you, uh, borrowed it." He reached to pat her hand. "Perfectly understandable," he said, "and perfectly innocent. You were going to bring it back once you'd finished it. So all this fuss has been over nothing."

"That's not what happened."

"It's not?"

"I read two chapters," she said, "and I thought I'd ask to borrow it some other time, or maybe not. But I put the pages back in the box and left them there."

"In the bathroom?"

"Yes."

"So you never did finish the book," our client said. "Well, if it ever turns up I'll be more than happy to lend it to you, but until then—"

"But perhaps Miss Botleigh has already finished the book," Haig suggested.

"How could she? She just told you she left it in the bathroom."

Haig said, "Miss Botleigh?"

"I finished the book," she said. "When everybody else went home, I stayed."

"My word," Zoltan Mihalyi said. "Woolrich never had a more devoted fan, or one half so beautiful."

"Not to finish the manuscript," she said, and turned to our host. "You asked me to stay," she said.

"I *wanted* you to stay," he agreed. "I wanted to *ask* you to stay. But I don't remember . . ."

"I guess you'd had quite a bit to drink," she said, "although you didn't

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show it. But you asked me to stay, and I'd been hoping you would ask me, because I wanted to stay."

"You must have had rather a lot to drink yourself," Harriet Quinlan murmured.

"Not that much," said the caterer. "I wanted to stay because he's a very attractive man."

Our client positively glowed, then turned red with embarrassment. "I knew I had a hole in my memory," he said, "but I didn't think anything significant could have fallen through it. So you actually stayed? God. What, uh, happened?"

"We went upstairs," Jeanne Botleigh said. "And we went to the bedroom, and we went to bed."

"Indeed," said Haig.

"And it was . . ."

"Quite wonderful," she said.

"And I don't remember. I think I'm going to kill myself."

"Not on Christmas Day," E. E. Stokes said. "And not with a mystery still unsolved. Haig, what became of the bloody manuscript?"

"Miss Botleigh?"

She looked at our host, then lowered her eyes. "You went to sleep afterward," she said, "and I felt entirely energized, and knew I couldn't sleep, and I thought I'd read for a while. And I remembered the manuscript, so I came down here and fetched it."

"And read it?"

"In bed. I thought you might wake up, in fact I was hoping you would. But you didn't."

"Damn it," our client said, with feeling.

"So I finished the manuscript and still didn't feel sleepy. And I got dressed and let myself out and went home."

There was a silence, broken at length by Zoltan Mihalyi, offering our client congratulations on his triumph and sympathy for the memory loss. "When you write your memoirs," he said, "you'll have to leave that chapter blank."

"Or have someone ghost it for you," Philip Perigord offered.

"The manuscript," Stokes said. "What became of it?"

"I don't know," the caterer said. "I finished it—"

"Which is more than Woolrich could say," Jayne Corn-Wallace said.

"—and I left it there."

"There?"

"In its box. On the bedside table, where you'd be sure to find it first thing in the morning. But I guess you didn't."

"The manuscript? Haig, you're telling me you want the *manuscript?*"

"You find my fee excessive?"

"But it wasn't even lost. No one took it. It was next to my bed. I'd have found it sooner or later."

"But you didn't," Haig said. "Not until you'd cost me and my young

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associate the better part of our holiday. You've been reading mysteries all your life. Now you got to see one solved in front of you, and in your own magnificent library."

He brightened. "It is a nice room, isn't it?"

"It's first-rate."

"Thanks. But Haig, listen to reason. You did solve the puzzle and recover the manuscript, but now you're demanding what you recovered as compensation. That's like rescuing a kidnap victim and insisting on adopting the child yourself."

"Nonsense. It's nothing like that."

"All right, then it's like recovering stolen jewels and demanding the jewels themselves as reward. It's just plain disproportionate. I hired you because I wanted the manuscript in my collection, and now you expect to wind up with it in your collection."

It did sound a little weird to me, but I kept my mouth shut. Haig had the ball, and I wanted to see where he'd go with it.

He put his fingertips together. "In *Black Orchids,"* he said, "Wolfe's client was his friend Lewis Hewitt. As recompense for his work, Wolfe insisted on all of the black orchid plants Hewitt had bred. Not one. All of them."

"That always seemed greedy to me."

"If we were speaking of fish," Haig went on, "I might be similarly inclined. But books are of use to me only as reading material. I want to *read* that book, sir, and I want to have it close to hand if I need to refer to it." He shrugged. "But I don't need the original that you prize so highly. Make me a copy."

"A copy?"

"Indeed. Have the manuscript photocopied."

"You'd be content with a . . . a copy?"

"And a credit," I said quickly, before Haig could give away the store. We'd put in a full day, and he ought to get more than a few hours' reading out of it. "A two-thousand-dollar store credit," I added, "which Mr. Haig can use up as he sees fit."

"Buying paperbacks and book-club editions," our client said. "It should last you for years." He heaved a sigh. "A photocopy and a store credit. Well, if that makes you happy . . ."

And that pretty much wrapped it up. I ran straight home and sat down at the typewriter, and if the story seems a little hurried it's because I was in a rush when I wrote it. See, our client tried for a second date with Jeanne Botleigh, to refresh his memory, I suppose, but a woman tends to feel less than flattered when you forget having gone to bed with her, and she wasn't having any.

So I called her the minute I got home, and we talked about this and that, and we've got a date in an hour and a half. I'll tell you this much, if I get lucky, I'll remember. So wish me luck, huh?

And, by the way . . .

Merry Christmas! ●

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"Okay, now when I say 'go,' open up those raincoats *wide!*"

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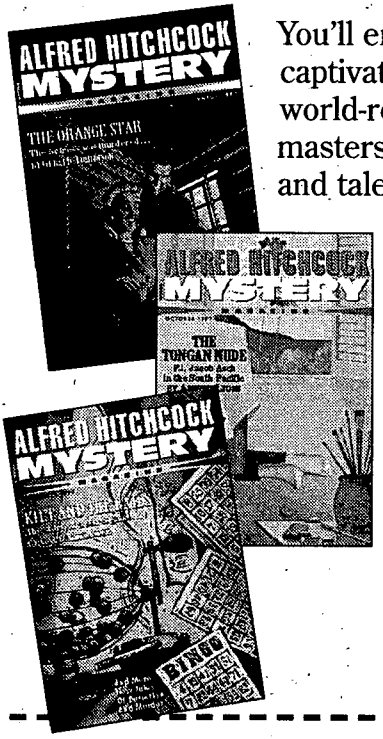

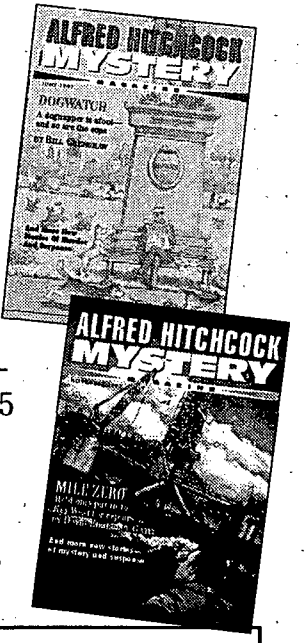

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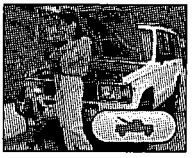

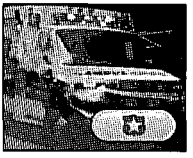

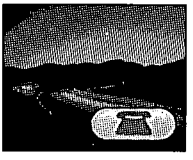

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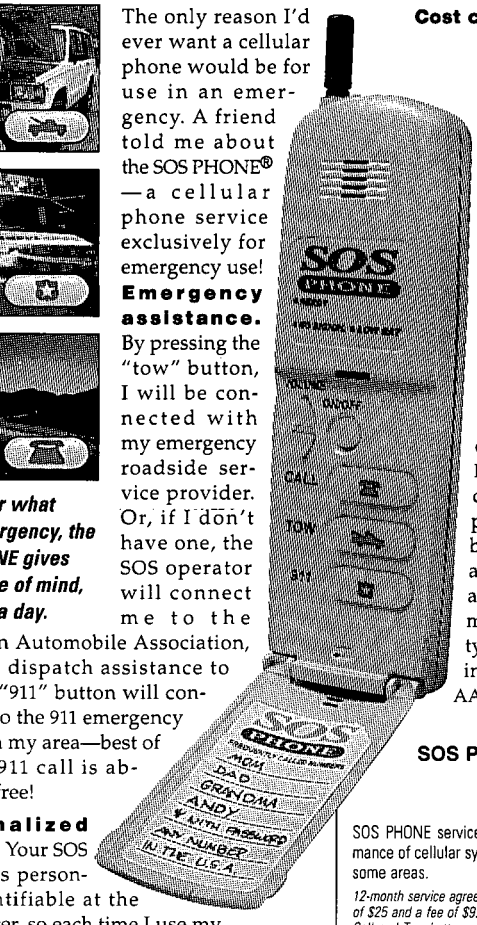

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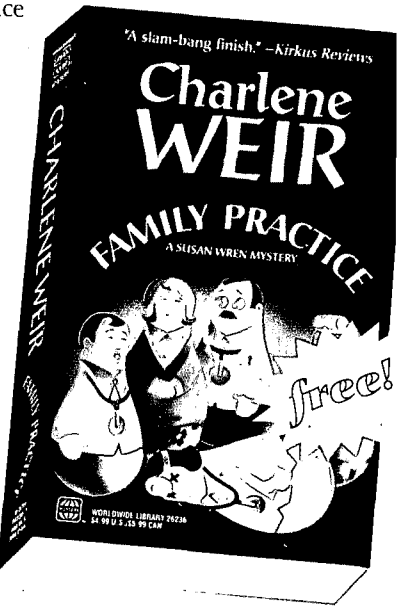

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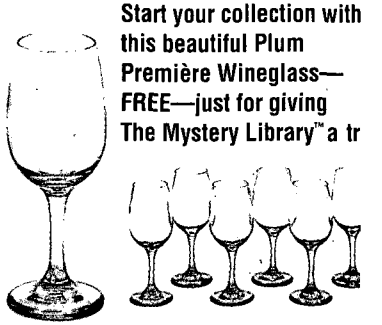

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